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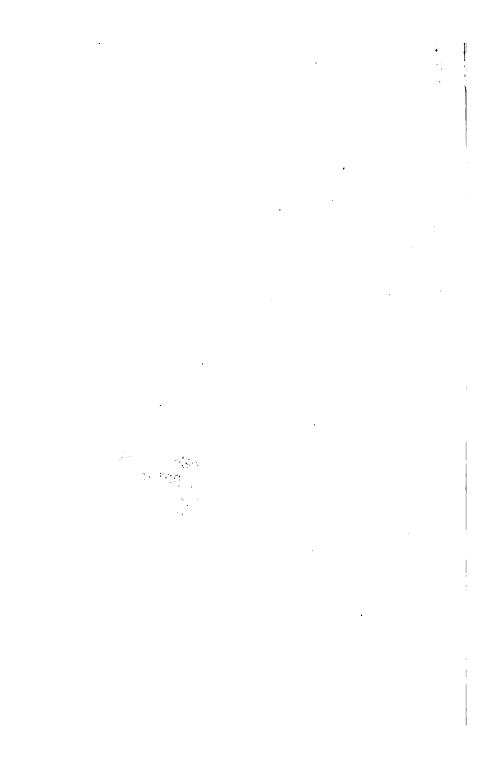
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IN TWO YEARS' TIME.

BY

ADA CAMBRIDGE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. II.



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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER			PAGE
I.	A CORNER SOFA	•••	1
II.	THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER		26
III.	Brookleigh	•••	47
IV.	How our "Hearl" came Home		72
V.	AUNT KATE'S GARDEN PARTY	•••	97
VI.	In the Twilight		124
VII.	"WHATEVER HAPPENS"	•••	158
VIII.	A LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA		179
IX.	How we met at last		202
X.	"THEY ARE OVER NOW"		231
XI.	Conclusion		259

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IN TWO YEARS' TIME.

CHAPTER I.

A CORNER SOFA.

AUNT Alice took up her gloves, and looked at the tall lady on uncle Goodeve's right hand, who moved back her chair, with a great rustling of moire antique and tinkling of loose bracelets, and swept in solemn dignity from the room. Matrons and maidens fell into their places in due order of precedence, with clumsy manceuvres, made necessary by tight strapping round their knees and ropy tails around their feet; and we all filed past Lord

Westbrook, who held the door open for Many who did not know him cast winning smiles at his gravely pleasant face; I, who did, swept by-almost the last of the little procession—with elevated chin and downcast eyes, trying to appear proudly self-possessed and indifferent, but conscious of tingling warmth all over my face as I felt him looking intently down upon me. In the hall, and on the stairs, the line broke up into scattered groups, and, on reaching the drawing-room, I was enabled to escape unnoticed to a remote sofa, where I tried to bury my head, ostrich fashion, in a book of photographs. It was a four-walled room, divided by wide-open curtains from another walled room, in which panel mirrors and pier glasses blazed at one another in the light of many clusters of gas-lamps.

was impossible to hide more than my head, and very soon I was followed and talked to by a young Girton College lady, who thirsted for information about the educational systems of the colonies. She was young, pretty, and well dressed, and as pleasant as a declared blue-stocking could well be to a comparative ignoramus such as I; but I could not help being more stupid than usual, and she could not help being a bore. However, I was grateful to her for shutting me off for half an hour from the rest of the female company. At the end of half an hour the gentlemen came up, and she broke off in the midst of a fervid description of some notable lady friend who had lately taken a seat on the school board, to pounce upon a little baldheaded professor in spectacles, who would have been the lion of the evening if Lord

Westbrook had not come, and was the lion to her still. I was thus left alone on my sofa, with one empty seat by my side, and a heavy table before me; and who should come straight to this far-away corner but my young lord himself, who had been anxiously expected in many other parts of the room.

I think I had expected him—I don't know; at any rate, I could not help feeling glad when I saw him striding over to me from the very door, with an air of deliberate intention, as if he had seen where I was sitting through the wall. I still looked upon him as a friend, which was more than I could say of the rest of the company; and involuntarily I drew in the spreading tail of my white dress to make room for him at my side. He sat down with an air of satisfaction, much as if he

were settling himself for the evening, and asked me how I had left my little friends of the voyage.

"Oh, dear little things; we parted in floods of tears," I answered, "and I have missed them so ever since. They are gone with their mother to Torquay until the warm weather is over, and then they are going to the Riviera somewhere for the winter. So I don't know when I shall see them again."

"You don't think you will go abroad again this year?"

"No; we have travelled enough for a little while. My aunt and cousins are going—they always go in August, Miss Goodeve says; but we shall be staying with uncle Armytage then, I think, for a long visit."

"I am very glad of that. Is your father

fond of shooting? I must tell him where he can find some sport at Brookleigh."

"Oh yes; he is very fond of it. We had a good deal of game around Narraporwidgee altogether—ducks, and wild turkey, and snipe, and native companions, and sometimes kangaroo in the Booloomooloo But they were all precarious, ranges. more or less; daddy and I have often tramped whole days about the paddocks and marshes without seeing a feather, except hawks and magpies—in the first week of the open season, too. The only things we never wanted for were 'possums. Nearly every fine moonlight night we got at least three or four in our own garden. The dogs used to come to the drawingroom windows and whine until we came out after them. Thy used to eat them for supper. Poor Spring!—the only thing I

ever scolded him for was a habit he had of dragging the nasty heads and tails on to the verandah, and leaving them there.

"Do you shoot, too, as well as your father?"

I was getting pleasantly chatty, after my habit, and forgetting my late discomfiture; but this question reminded me of it again.

- "No, I don't," I retorted, with a flash of colour in my face; "nor smoke either."
 - "I beg your pardon, you said 'we.'"
- "Because I am daddy's companion, Lord Westbrook; he likes me to be with him in his rambles. I dare say I shall go shooting with him at Brookleigh, but I shall not touch a gun any the more for that."

He was silent for a few seconds, and I unfurled a fan and began to wave it energetically at my flushed cheeks. Then

he said gently, "I think you will like Brookleigh, Miss Chamberlayne. I have been all over the world, and have never seen a bit of country so peacefully green, and flowery, and pretty. And never such a charming house as the rectory anywhere."

The fan dropped on my knee, and I turned to him with renewed interest. He was looking at me with the kindest, friendliest, sorriest eyes, and with the air of a man tolerant of the pettishness of a child—which, nevertheless, was not irritating even to my sensitive consciousness.

"Really?" I interrogated. "I am so glad, for it is just what I have imagined and looked forward to. I wish we were going there to-morrow!"

"You are not tired of London yet, surely?"

"I am—I hate London—I wish I had never set foot in it."

"Why?—no, I beg your pardon. That was a very rude question—do not answer it. I'm afraid it is my fate to be rude to you."

I lifted eager eyes to his face, which was turned partly away from the rest of the company and regarding me with unmistakable friendship and a little wistful anxiety, and I took one of my reckless resolutions. Before my aunt and Bertha could give their version of the Richmond affair (as I was afraid they might think it their duty to do, for the credit of the family), I would tell the whole story to him myself, and leave him to think me an unsophisticated savage, if he liked, so long as I was spared the dreadful suspicion of fastness which I was afraid he had begun to attach to me.

"I liked London until to-day," I said hurriedly; "but to-day I got into trouble from not knowing London ways. It was about that drive to Richmond that you spoke of at dinner. I went alone with my cousin, Captain Goodeve. I did not know it was so—so unconventional—until I got home and was scolded for it. I did not mean to go so far—it was all a mistake—I did not do it purposely."

Tears were filling my eyes and I put my elbow on the table before me and held my fan aslant to hide them, as I made this bungling confession. Lord Westbrook turned over the leaves of a book beside him, and bent his head over it so as to bring himself nearer to me. "You are very good to give me your confidence," he said, in an earnest undertone. "Let me think it shows you trust me to understand

you. I know exactly how it was—of course, I know."

- "You did not know at first-"
- "I was a great fool for half a minute," he said rather hotly, "with your aunt and cousins going on in that queer way; but it was not for any longer, I do assure you."

"I am so glad. It hurt me more than anything to see you look at me like that," I responded innocently, feeling that I had got under shelter, and was no longer forlorn and defenceless in my disgrace. "You see, this is how it was. I saw Regy's horses standing at the door, and I wanted to drive them, and Regy said I couldn't. I can drive well, really; and mother says many ladies in England are good whips too."

I looked at him anxiously, and he said.

"Certainly, Miss Armytage is one of them," with comforting alacrity.

"I used always to drive mother about," I went on, "for on a station there are not often men to spare; and daddy trusted me with very good horses, because he knew I was capable of managing them. So when Regy seemed to laugh at me, I asked him just to let me try for a little way, to prove that I was not boasting. And then he suggested a drive into the country, and I had never seen the country, except from the railway, and I did not know he was going so far. And then he wanted to go to the Star and Garter, because he said the horses should be fed," I faltered, becoming deeper dyed in the hue of shame as I mentioned this crowning act of indiscretion.

Lord Westbrook was looking very

severely at Regy, when I stole a glance at him to see how he was taking these delicate confidences—for he was quite silent and still. Regy was chatting gaily round an ottoman in the middle of the room, on which my Girton College lady sat in a circle of fair ones, and was quite unconscious of our observation. The clear, quick eyes came back to me with a warmth of friendly sympathy that I found pleasant but disconcerting. "I know-I know," he said, in an eager undertone. distress yourself to talk about it, and yet it has given me so much pleasure to hear you tell your thoughts. You have done nothing wrong—oh, of course you haven't! As for Mrs. Grundy—pray Heaven she may not try to spoil you, that's all."

"She won't take that trouble. She does not like me well enough," I answered, laughing, feeling my spirits rising like cork.

"She will like you well enough," he said quickly, "for she is a good creature in the main, and knows a true woman when she sees one, and how to honour her as she deserves."

Here he checked himself, as if he thought he was running on a little too fast, and began to turn over the "articles of virtue," as Tom called them, on the table before him. He took up a tiny ornamental work-basket, which always stood there unused, with a gold thimble and scissors lying like jewels on a bed of crimson satin, and a little strip of crewel work dangling out, and asked me if I had worked the blue-green leaves and the green-blue convolvuli on that wispy bit of kitchen-cloth.

"Oh dear no," said I gaily, spreading it out and trying to make the embroidery lie flat, which it wouldn't; "nobody has worked it that I know of. It lies here always, half in the basket and half out, just to show that we are in the height of fashion—even in our needlework. Don't you think it is very lovely? Such artistic delicacy and finish about it, you see." I was so happy-with that pleasant knowledge that I was a "true woman" in the estimation of one whom my instinct told me was a true man, and stood in his sight unhurt by anything he had known of me —that I became flippant. I laid my arms on the table and discoursed volubly, with no more reference to the surrounding company than if the room had contained none. Father sat down with us a little time, Bertha rustled past the table once or twice, and made a few remarks about nothing in particular; aunt Alice came over to ask Lord Westbrook graciously if he would oblige them with a song—which he was sorry to say was out of his power. But he made no movement to vacate his seat for anybody, and I was quite comfortable and satisfied with mine.

Quite late in the evening, however, mother walked over to us with that particular look on her face which showed me that she meant it—whatever it was. "Kitty, dear," she said quietly, "you are asked to sing."

"Very well, mother; I shall be very happy," I responded, rising. "What shall I sing?"

As she led me off she whispered gravely, "You are making yourself a little conspicuous, dear. Do not forget that there

are other guests besides Lord Westbrook."

"Oh dear, oh dear! what have I done now?" I exclaimed in dismay.

"Nothing, love, nothing," she said hastily, for we were approaching the piano, and many eyes were upon me. "But aunt is getting a little vexed with Lord Westbrook for not distributing himself better."

"I have not been keeping him," I protested earnestly, not in the least aware that I was telling an untruth. And then I went to look for my music, feeling illused for a moment.

Only for a moment. I was too happy at having set Lord Westbrook's doubts of me at rest to take mother's little rebuke to heart, and, moreover, though my other accomplishments might not have been much to boast of, I could sing. And I don't

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believe there is a living being who can do that well who does not enjoy doing it. I enjoyed it, at any rate.

Eleanor, who had the rare gift of being able to play accompaniments, came over to offer to play for me, and I gladly made way for her. She had the soft, unassuming, sympathetic way of doing this that she had of doing everything. She did not strive for any brilliance of effect for her own performance, as nineteen out of every twenty would; but just made a delicate ripple of the music, that followed or paused for you just as you liked, and helped to express, without attempting to interfere with you. Yet it was as artistic in its way as the sweetest and most poetic human voice that ever trusted to it. song that somebody was very anxious to hear was "One morning, O so early," not one of my best; but I did not care what it was. I stood at Eleanor's shoulder, warm, and happy, and confident, and felt that I could make anything sound sweet.

"Do us credit, Kitty," said my father's eyes from the other end of the room.

"I mean to, daddy," I replied in the same language. And I flatter myself I did.

I was not thinking of Lord Westbrook any more than of the rest of the company; but, when I was in the middle of my song, I saw him leaning his arms upon the piano and listening, with his clear eyes intently watching my face; and then I felt that I was singing for him. Other men came round and listened; Captain Damer stood still beside me (and said "By Jove!" when I had done—which was as great a compliment, I think, as

I ever had in my life). There was a more silent attention to my performance than was accorded to any other person who had "favoured the company:" but there was that in his attitude and in the expression of his face that my instinct told me indicated the homage to my one great gift that was best worth having. He "understood" me in more ways than one.

There was a clamour for another song when I moved away from the piano, in which he joined with silent, petitioning eyes; and I readily turned back to give it—one of my own choosing this time. I was in the mood to distinguish myself. But mother interposed and inveigled me away, and substituted another aspirant for honour in my place; and I found myself conveyed to a central ottoman, where I could have no more private tête-à-tête. I

think I was quite as disappointed that I could not go on singing to him as he was.

However, the evening was all but over now. Carriages began to be announced; little knots of talkers broke up; the lady who followed me at the piano was the last to sing. In half an hour there was that general disintegration that heralded the speedy dispersion of the guests. One of the last to leave was Lord Westbrook, and his last good-night was to me, as I chanced to be standing with Eleanor not far from the door.

- "Your song was very beautiful, Miss Chamberlayne," he said with abrupt earnestness.
- "Thank you," I replied simply, inwardly swelling with satisfaction.
- "I shall do myself the pleasure of calling on Mrs. Goodeve to-morrow before

I leave town. I am afraid it will be a little early; but I hope I shall be the more likely to find you in. When I come to Brookleigh again, Miss Armytage," addressing Eleanor, "I hope I shall find a family party at the rectory."

"I hope you will," said Eleanor. "Will you be returning to the hall at once, Lord Westbrook?"

"Before the shooting, at any rate," said he. "I am afraid I have quite got the character of an absentee landlord; I am going to turn over a new leaf now."

"Brookleigh will be delighted to hear of any chance of your settling at home," said she, with her gracious gentleness, and a serious air that I often noticed afterwards in connection with lax parishioners who failed to come regularly to church. "Old Brown, at the lodge, never omits

to ask if I know when that good day is coming."

- "Poor old Brown! I am glad to hear he wears so well. Does he still object to my being called Lord Westbrook?"
- "Oh dear yes; he always corrects me with unflagging patience. 'Hearl Westbrook, Miss, if you please.' Kitty, we'll go and see him together, and you shall tell him you met Lord Westbrook in London, and see what he will say. But it will be a very, very good thing for the place," she concluded gravely.
- "Well, I'm coming. I'm going to be a good boy. Good-bye, Miss Armytage. Good-night, Miss Chamberlayne. I shall see you to-morrow."
- "I hope so," I responded frankly. And he shook hands with us, bowed, and went away.

Eleanor and I stole away as soon as we could for a little chat in my room before we went to bed, formal good-nights being dispensed with in the family on these When I had made her comoccasions. fortable in an easy chair, I tenderly took off "my emeralds" and laid them away in their little Chubb safe; I untied myself out of my dress and folded it up; I put my little bouquet in water; then I proceeded to array myself in one of my embroidered French dressing-gowns, which was soft and white, and had a long train, and was so charming with its blue bows that I quite begrudged it its humble uses. I was about to exchange my satin shoes for a pair of bedroom slippers, when Eleanor pointed out that I had lost a silver buckle from one of them. As I had not undone my hair, I said I would go downstairs again and look for it; whereupon Eleanor kissed me and went away, and I descended the stairs to the drawing-room. Here the greatest surprise of that eventful day awaited me.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

The room was still lit up, as when I left it, but it was deserted by all but two people. Bertha and Bella, who had tidy little ways of their own, were sorting the scattered books and sheets of music and storing them away in the canterbury. Bella was on her knees idly smoothing the sheets under her hand, as if she hardly knew what she was about; Bertha was doing her part of looker-on, sitting on the edge of an ottoman, with her hands clasped round her knee. They were talk-

ing earnestly in undertones, but turned to look at me, as I entered, in sudden and disconcerting silence. The stealthy glance that Bella shot at her sister, and the gloomy coldness of Bertha's stare, struck me very unpleasantly. My entrance into their company had never been greeted in that way before. I immediately concluded that they had been talking secrets, and were annoyed at being interrupted, and, as they might have thought, overheard.

"I have come," I said hastily, "to look for a buckle I have lost off my shoe. Have you seen it anywhere?"

"No, I haven't seen it," replied Bertha, sullenly. "I dare say it's over by that sofa, where you planted yourself all the evening."

"I saw it was gone when you sat down on the ottoman—after your mother fetched you out of your corner, you know," said Bella.

"You really did display your feet so that no one could help seeing. But I thought, perhaps, you had given it to Lord Westbrook for a keepsake," she added, with a disagreeable giggle. "You seemed to find it so very hard to part from him."

I came to a standstill in the middle of the room, and stared at them in amazement. "I really don't know what you are talking about," I said coldly.

"Oh, I dare say!" sneered Bertha. "The rôle of ingénue is very pretty, no doubt, but it won't do to play it with us. We can see through it perfectly well."

- "And so can others," put in Bella.
- "Yes, indeed. You made yourself the

laughing-stock of the whole room, I can tell you."

- "It was really quite sickening," chimed in Bella's spiteful echo again, "to see the way you threw yourself at that man's head, just because he was a lord, never letting anybody else come near him!"
- "And so barefaced—after his knowing what you had done with Regy. But, of course, he understands the sort of thing you like."
- "Of course he does. Men are always ready to amuse themselves with anybody who runs after them."
- "He'll make fun of you with his friends at his club to-morrow; that's all you'll get by it."

I could hardly believe my ears, and I was absolutely struck dumb with astonishment and rage. For a few seconds after

this pause in their tirade I could not say a word, because adequate words were nowhere. Then I tried to collect myself.

"You are two of the rudest and coarsest girls I ever met in my life," I said, with unspeakable disgust and scorn.

"Thank you," retorted Bertha, with a toss of the head and a vicious grimace, not feeling this simple speech to be exactly oil upon the troubled waters. "But I don't think you are qualified to give an opinion, I don't indeed."

"Hardly," said Bella. "You had better look at home, Miss Kitty, before you set yourself up to be a judge of manners."

"You don't know even the common rudiments of good manners; you are more vulgar than I could have believed possible! Manners! I am ashamed of myself that I can stand here to listen to you."

"I shouldn't have thought shame was a feeling you were much troubled with, should you, Bella? It is we, I think, who have reason to be ashamed when one of our own family behaves as you have done to-day." Bertha flounced off her ottoman as she made this polite remark, and Bella, in angry haste, began to gather her loose music together, asking her sister, "What else was to be expected?" in a stage aside that must have been perfectly audible to the footman who was putting out the lights on the stairs.

"That will do," I said, at a white heat of indignation that was too intense for further speech. "I am going up to my mother. She will be very sorry that she ever permitted me to be exposed to this sort of thing, which is not at all in our way."

This was rather a weak ending to my bold line of action, but it was a stroke that took more effect than anything I had said before.

"You will be very mean if you go and tattle to your mother about everything we say," Bertha began hastily.

"And of course we don't mean quite all we say when we are a little put out—nobody does," continued Bella, in evident anxiety to smooth things down. "Don't go until you have found your buckle, Kitty; if it is one of the silver ones, it is too valuable to lose. It is under the ottoman, perhaps."

But I swept across the room with my head in the air, and scorned to consider buckles at such a moment. "Come back, Kitty, and don't be silly!" called Bertha, with sharp insistance.

"Kitty, Kitty dear!" repeated Bella's softer voice, wailing abjectly, "do stay till we tell you——"

But I closed the door behind me, with a bang that must have made all the "articles of virtue" jump, whisked up the tail of my gown and flew upstairs, never pausing until I had burst into my father's dressing-closet, the door of which, standing ajar, showed me he was still in the smoking-room, and made my way to mother.

She was sitting before her looking-glass, slowly brushing her hair—hair that was almost as bright and plentiful as my own—with a pleasant sort of dreamy meditativeness in her gentle face, as if her thoughts were happy ones. "Ah, my Kitty," she exclaimed, looking up brightly

as I entered; "I was just wondering whether you were in bed, love. Why, why, what is the matter? My dear one, what is the matter?"

She turned round on her chair, and held out her hand, and I flung myself on the floor before her, buried my head in her lap, and gave way to my pent-up passion in a violent burst of tears.

"Oh, mother, take me away from this house! Take me away from these horrid people. I can't bear it!" were my first words, as soon as I could speak.

"Hush, dear, you must not speak of your father's relations in that way," she murmured, stroking my hair. But there was that in her voice that told me her quick sense had divined the nature of my trouble, and that she was ready to identify herself with it as fully as I could desire.

"They say—they say—that I have been throwing myself at his head because he is a lord," I sobbed.

"They must have sadly forgotten themselves," she replied. "That was Bertha and Bella, I suppose? Aunt would be incapable of so coarse a thought."

"Yes, it was Bertha and Bella. I found them alone just now, when I went back to the drawing-room to look for something; they set upon me, mother—they set upon me as if I had been a kitchen-maid, and had done everything that was gross and immodest, just because they are jealous that Lord Westbrook talked to me more than to them. I never thought anybody would dare to insult me so! They said I made myself the laughing-stock of the whole room, and that he would make fun of me at his club to-morrow because I ran

after him. Oh, mother, they said he did it because he knew, by my having gone out alone with Regy to-day, that I was the sort of girl whom men could amuse themselves with, and that I should like I looked up at her with streaming eyes, as I detailed my bitter grievances, and I did not seek her sympathy in vain. The colour had risen to her face, and an angry glitter to her soft eyes. She drew me up to her with eager fondness, but with hands that trembled with her indignation. "I always saw that they were not well-bred or nice," she said quickly, "and I disliked them as companions for you. I am sorry to say it, as they are your cousins. They have not been brought up in a good school, I fear. But I did not think them capable of such coarseness as that."

"I told them they were coarse, mother."

"You had better have said nothing, but have left them at once. You must not allow yourself to give way to rude language, whatever provocation you may have."

"No, mother; that was nearly all I said. But oh, must we go on staying here? I do hate it so!"

"Certainly not. You may make your mind easy about that, Kitty. I will speak to your father to-night, and we will make some arrangement with aunt Kate to return to Brookleigh with her. She is very anxious to have us, so that it can easily be managed. Only mind, dear—no scenes or squabbles about it. Behave to your cousins as usual—as a lady would—

while you remain, and do not give any of the family cause to suppose that we are going away in dudgeon, after such a warm welcome as we have had. That would be in very bad taste."

"No, mother, I'll try not. Only if I attempt to say civil things to Bertha and Bella, after what they said to me to-night, I am sure the words will choke me."

"Do not attempt it, except when I am with you. Keep as much with me or your father as you can while you remain here."

"I wish I had been tied to your apronstrings all this miserable day!" I sighed sadly. "Don't lose sight of me any more, mother, until we get clear of London. I suppose Eleanor and I will be all right at Brookleigh, rambling about the lanes. I couldn't very well get into trouble there."

"I can trust you, my Kitty, whether here or there," said mother, kissing me with grave fondness. "I am never afraid that you will be guilty of anything worse than an indiscretion for want of knowing. And as for trouble, come and tell all your troubles to me, as you have done to-night; that is all I ask. My dear, dear, true girl," she broke out in an unwonted fervour of motherliness, "I don't think I would have you in any way different from what you are, or what you will be. There, good-night, darling, forget all about it now, and go to sleep. Here comes your father."

I went back through the dressing-room to give my dear old daddy a convulsive hug, and to afford him an opportunity for praising me, as he loved to do, for having sung so sweetly and looked so nice.

- "We'll have two or three more white frocks for you, old woman," said he. "It was quite refreshing to look at you amongst all those bedizened young frumps."
- "Oh, daddy, bedizened! Some of them had beautiful dresses."
- "Had they? Then they didn't set them off, that's all I can say. They'll have to come to young Australia to learn, after all——"
- "Harry, Harry," called mother, who did not approve of this sort of thing. "Let the child go to bed, and don't talk nonsense."

And so my long day was over at last. I went to my own bedroom, and locked the door (with some sort of vague idea of protecting myself against further molestation), and I felt as if a year had been added to my experience of life since I had

risen from bed in the morning. I was tired of it all as tired could be, but I was too much excited and upset to be able to take [mother's advice and forget all about it and go to sleep. What I should have liked to do, but for those city streets, which now seemed to hem me round and suffocate me, was to tuck up my skirts and set off for a long walk. I would have done it if I had been at Narraporwidgee, only, as I dismally reflected, all this could never have happened there. Often and often had I stolen out into the soft and fragrant darkness when I was too hot to sleep, or was otherwise restless; just turning the button of my French window (which was all the fastening it had or needed), and stepping down the verandah into the garden, and thence out into the bush. Sometimes Spring and I had a glorious opossum hunt before we returned to our head-quarters; sometimes, when more meditatively disposed, we sat under the apple tree in the orchard and ate fruit; more than once we stole across the paddocks, and had a dip in the river—at those times when long-continued north winds and bush fires together had made things very bad for sleeping. But those days—or rather, those nights—were all over and done with now. There was no such thing to be dreamed of as a nocturnal ramble out of doors with only a dog for company. Good gracious, no; I should think not, indeed!

I did what I could for freedom. I opened my window widely and leaned out, after extinguishing the candles on the dressing-table. It was a lovely night, though with a chill in it that no such

summer night would have known at Narraporwidgee—a chill which crept unawares through my French embroideries, and gave me an ache in my bones next day. The stars were shining over the tall roofs of the square; the hanging garden on the drawing-room balcony below me sent up whiffs of delicious fragrance now and then; a sweet little bird was cheeping somewhere during intervals of wakefulness, and I wondered why he stopped in London when he had all the country to go to. Carriages rumbled in the street below, flashing their lamp-lights from side to side; but I was too high up to see into them, and I did not want lamps. I leaned my elbow on the window-sill and looked up at the stars, and they swam like silver bubbles of all shapes and sizes through a mist of bitter tears.

"O Tom, Tom!" my heart was crying all the time. "O my dear, dear love! Where are you now? And why cannot I be where you are?" I never felt so appalled before by the awful distance that parted us from one another. He could not even see the same stars that I saw. For the matter of that, he could never stars at all when I saw them. Here was I, in this still, dark, quiet summer night, all alone to think of him; and there was he, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, riding about his run, full of business, breaking in his young horses, perhaps, or interviewing dealers who came to buy sheep. One on one side of the world and one on the other, and two long years to come before either could stir hand or foot towards the bridging that gulf of fifteen thousand miles between them.

And no letters, no messages, no anything.

This piteous state of things assumed a tragic aspect that was altogether too much for me in my excited state. I knelt on a stool, and laid my head on the windowledge, and cried with all my heart (for the third time that day)—whispering passionate nonsense under my breath to my darling far away, who, perhaps, so hopeless did the future look, might never hear my voice again in this world. Things I would not have said to him if I had been with him I said to the phantom I clasped in my empty arms and hugged close to my breast-whatever it was that stood for Tom, to be clung to in my troubled solitude. And yet my love and longing could not find expression in the utmost abandonment of speech.

46 IN TWO YEARS' TIME.

However, the little outburst did me good. It worked off my superfluous excitement, and left me quiet to go to sleep.

CHAPTER III.

BROOKLEIGH.

I AM reminded by an impartial critic of many disparaging comments that I used to make upon Brookleigh village when I was there. It certainly had a few dirty lanes, and some very squalid cottages, inhabited by families whose pinching poverty was almost inconceivable to me, who had only my Australian experiences to go upon. It had a green that was by no means the green of tradition—a soft expanse of turf in the very bosom of the place, sheltered by clumps

of trees, and dedicated to rural fêtes, and cricket matches, and lovers' evening meetings; but a bare and dreary waste outside the village proper, where geese and donkeys strayed about, and picked up a precarious livelihood. There were one or two obtrusive farmyards, neither grateful to the eye nor fragrant to the nose; and occasional cabbage gardens and refuse heaps, and ragged children and Independent pigs, that were not exactly picturesque features of the landscape to an uneducated taste. But what were these things to speak of? I recall them with an effort, and grasp them with difficulty.

Brookleigh is for ever a memory of hay-scented meadows and poppy-sprinkled cornfields, of the smell of flowering beans and red clover, and of the honeysuckle and sweetbriar that curtained shady lanes. Oh, what lanes! Eleanor and I used to drive along them in her pony carriage, and the thud of the scampering hoofs was like striking velvet. I could reach out my hand as we passed along, and drag down long festoons of starry nightshade, and trails of shell-pink dog roses, with buds like coral. The sunshine falling through green veils of new-leaved oak and beech boughs; the purple foxgloves lifting their bee-haunted bells almost under our wheels; the ox-eyed daises and meshes of clinging columbine creeping about in tangled fringes of bearded grass under the hedges and over the ditches—how distinctly I see them all, as I saw them first, in my own mind's eye! Aye, and how I hear them too !-- the sound of the cuckoo far away; of the rooks cawing in concert with their fathers and mothers, in all the flowery pastures; of the mavis and the woodlark in the depths of Brookleigh woods.

But the heart of Brookleigh, to me, was the rectory. It stood back from a quiet road, amongst its shaven lawns and its trim shrubberies, out of sight and hearing of everything but its own stately and gracious surroundings—such a clergyman's house as I had never imagined in my wildest dreams. First there were the entrance-gates—two of them—connected with each other by a stone wall, a belt of lime trees, and an inner hedge of rhododendrons. Then there was a lawn like velvet, with croquet hoops here and badminton nets there, and rustic baskets and vases overflowing with bright flowers everywhere. There was a sweep of gravelled roadway all round this fair half-circle, and then a width of box-bordered flower-bed, and then a thick belt of shrubbery—in which, when I saw it first, the mountain ash and guelder rose were flowering in the midst of late-blowing lilacs, against a background of burnished laurels and of noble chestnut trees full of blossom.

There were always two gardeners to be seen about this garden, snipping and trimming, and weeding and watering, so that there was never a dead leaf or flower, or a presuming sucker, or anything but growth and glory anywhere. Behind the shrubbery on one side lay the equally well-kept graveyard, sheltered by elms and yew trees, and nestling up to the lichened walls of the little old Norman church, whose tower was the haunt of swifts and

swallows in that tender June time. the other side of the shrubbery (shut off from the road by high folding doors) were the extensive outbuildings of the rectory. all substantial, well-appointed, and orderly, with a brougham and a basket carriage in the coachhouse, and two or three satincoated animals champing oats in the stable. And in the midst of the shrubbery, showing only its tall mediæval chimneys to the road, but fronting the garden and the lawn, with long, low, ivied walls (set with heavy square windows, eyebrowed with stone labels, and enriched with a few dim heraldic blazonries in their upper compartments)—with a massive porch under a massive gable at one end, and a modern conservatory at the other—was the rectory house. "My country parsonage," uncle Armytage called it; but it was so altogether opposed to my idea of parsonages that I never called it by that familiar name.

When we drove up to the door the day we arrived there, quite a large party came out to meet us. There were three dear little girls, in simplest holland blouses, and the most exquisite shoes and stockings, all with fair hair fringed on their foreheads, and little jet crosses round their necks; a stout lady in spectacles, who overflowed with smiles and welcomes; two maid-servants and a man in black; one lovely mastiff, with a thick head, hanging lips, and small drooping ears, who gazed into our faces in the most stern and melancholy manner, while he wagged his tail delightedly; and one darling little Blenheim spaniel, like a bundle of silk, with a stumpy muzzle, a quite round skull, long, soft, fringed ears, and great liquid eyes, with a tan mark over each, who flew at Eleanor with screams of joy. The group harmonized well with the background of the old ivied house; indeed, I think everything harmonized that belonged to aunt Kate.

The rectory was just as charming inside as out. There were tiles in the hall, and soft old Turkey carpets on the oaken floors; antique carvings about the staircase and the furniture, and the most delicate harmonies in the chintz hangings and the distempered walls. There were deep chairs and sofas that swallowed you up, and set you in the mood for pleasant thoughts; and there were comfortable tables, that did not tip over if you ran against them accidentally, always near enough to give you the right sort of

china bowls of flowers, and single blooms in clear slender glasses were always scattered all about that long, low, spacious, cosy drawing-room, where there was never a glare of daylight (by reason of the ivy-shaded, diamond-paned, emblazoned lattices of those lovely windows), and never a glare of gaslight either—only a soft glow of wax candles and porcelain-shaded lamps, shining from wall brackets and tables, and about the piano in its recess, and not quite dissolving the shadows in the far corners.

The lighting up of aunt Kate's room—when dinner was over, and twilight set in—put me out of conceit with gas. There was no "suite" at the rectory—not even a uniformity of pattern in my aunt's favourite soft-toned chintz, which pinafored

and petticoated the apparently legless lounges, and the huge downy cushions that padded them. No one chair matched another, except in seductive comfort. There were no antimacassars, either, to rub into wisps at your back when you tried to settle yourself, and to drag about on your buttons when you got up. Pictures hung low, in the light that suited them, and where you could study them without giving yourself a stiff neck. There were delicate watercolour landscapes, chosen, not on account of famous parentage, but because the scenes they depicted were lovely-Alpine peaks at sunrise, and Scottish valleys in the misty Highland morning, and sweet Swiss lakes in their shadows; even a breezy bit of h fishing boats, and one enchantet scene in Venice, which I was

never tired of looking at. The house was remarkable for pictures: there were pictures everywhere. Even the nursery was papered with the London News, and a screen in my bedroom with M. Du Maurier's graceful sketches from Punch. Alas, there was only one "old master" (and he was in the library), and nothing beside that would have been of any value to a collector. Photographs abounded— Holman Hunt's famous sacred subjects, of course, and the tender stories of Ary Scheffer and Paul Delaroche, and prints of Turner's misty dream pictures, of Landseer's immortal stags and hounds, and even of Etty's gods and goddessesall mixed up together, and yet in some way of arrangement harmonizing.

I don't know anything of the rules of art, and I have been told that aunt Kate

by no means observed them strictly; but I know there did not appear to me to be one incongruity in that house. The only thing that seemed to me to be oddly at variance with my sense of the fitness of things, was to see uncle Armytage, with his grand old Roman nose, and his grand air of aristocratic dignity, sitting at the foot of his table, with a stately man-servant at his back and a glass of his priceless old port in his hand; and to hear him earnestly denouncing the evils of a state church, and speaking of a probable future, when the voluntary system of primitive times would be restored in England, as if it would mark the coming of the Golden Age.

"Oh, daddy," I could not help exclaiming on one of these occasions, "if only uncle Armytage knew what we know!"

"Ah," responded father, with something very like a wink. "I should like to take him over to our country for a year or two, and see how he and the voluntary system would suit one another."

At which preposterous suggestion I laughed so immoderately that uncle Armytage was half inclined to be offended.

Well, I was very happy at Brookleigh—as happy as I could be with one great aching want unsatisfied. We were all happy, indeed. Mother and aunt Kate, in their quiet ways, were as devoted to one another's society as a couple of congenial schoolgirls—so much so, that the question of our departure from the rectory, to set up housekeeping for ourselves, was tacitly admitted to be a painful subject, to be ignored as long as possible. Father, who was in his native county, visited his

old friends and his old haunts, and enjoyed himself that way; for uncle Armytage was not quite the companion for him that aunt Kate was to mother. One of his first excursions, which he made in a rather clandestine manner, was to see his brother James, whom he found a brokendown, disappointed, ailing old man; and, having taken this bold step, to his own extreme satisfaction, he seldom allowed a week to pass without "just running over," as he called it, to "cheer the old boy up." I had expected this renewal of intercourse, and was quite prepared for all that came of it. Never another word did he say as to his early wrongs in respect of his father's property; if anybody was to be blamed now it was himself, for having brought public disgrace on "poor Jim" by exposing his little weaknesses. Uncle

Armytage, who did not himself feel inclined to forgive the family culprit, kindly allowed that my dear father was "most magnanimous;" but I don't think that was an idea that ever suggested itself to him. On the contrary, he did not believe now, he said, that Jim had really meant to defraud the younger members of his family (by what process of reasoning he had arrived at that conclusion nobody could quite make out); and he was afraid they had all been "rather hard on him." And so it was for Jim to forgive, if anybody; that was really what his theory of the matter came to. Anyhow-anyhow (this was what he fell back upon when uncle Armytage became too argumentative about it)—here they were now, all rich, and prosperous, with their children about them; and there was he, solitary, sickly, and soured, all alone in a dismal old tumble-down place, without a soul belonging to him. On this account, if on no other, daddy considered it was clearly his duty to bear malice no longer towards uncle James.

Duty, however, did not remain his sole inducement to visit his paternal home so often. The pleasure and interest that he got from poor uncle James's antiquated husbandry, and his own opportunity for inculcating the principles of orthodox modern farming, was much keener than anybody but himself knew, except mother and I, who were delighted that he had fallen upon congenial occupation, which otherwise he would have been much in need of. He used to come back to the rectory quite excited about his discoveries, the significance whereof I fully appre-

ciated, though uncle Armytage had seldom any clear notions about them.

"Did you ever read Silas Marner, Kitty?" he asked one day, when he walked home from the railway-station, rubbing his hands.

"Oh yes, daddy, of course. Miss Nancy riding on a pillion to a ball, in her drab joseph, with her ball dress in a bandbox on her knee. How delightful parties in England must have been in those days to what they are now!"

"I don't know about parties; but, upon my word, those farms of James's might belong to Raveloe village just as it was then. I don't believe he has had a new implement on the place since he came into the property, before you were born. I declare, if I find him threshing his crops with flails, I shan't be surprised. And he is so thick-headed, poor, dear old boy, there's no driving a new idea into him. 'What was good enough for his father is good enough for him,' he says; the way those old-fashioned folks talk, as if everything stood still because they didn't want to go on. Where's that circular of Ransome's, Kitty? I'm going to make him a little present, and chance his condescending to use it." With which he bustled away to his writing-table, full of business and importance.

As for Eleanor and me, we had what a Yankee might call a real good time all that quiet summer. We studied together at regular hours; we practised our music diligently; we spoke German with Miss Müller, the governess, to improve our accent; and I also became an adept in illuminating on vellum, and making cotton

frocks and flannel petticoats for the poor. Every Wednesday evening and every Friday morning we went to church together, and on Friday evening we drilled the choir, which was a very hopeless task; every alternate day we inspected certain classes in the parish school; nearly every afternoon, when it was not bad weather, and there were no calls to make or visitors to entertain, we walked or drove about the village, "doing our parish work," as Eleanor gravely styled it.

Poor dear girl, how hard she struggled to break me in properly to this routine, and how impracticable a pupil I fear I was—worse than all the choir put together. I was as willing to learn as she was to teach (and I could not say more for myself than that); and yet I was daily guilty of blunders and indiscretions that must have

distressed her tender soul to the last degree. When I took my turn to visit the sick, I used to forget to read the Bible to them, but would get talking of Australia and all sorts of worldly things, to cheer them up, so that when she made her anxious inquiries as to their frame of mind I had no bulletin to give her. With my class in the Sunday school I maintained no sort of discipline, because I sometimes played with the children and sometimes boxed their ears, and because I often told themconcerning sundry articles of the orthodox faith—that it did not matter much so long as they were good girls and boys. several errors, when she became aware of them, made Eleanor's hair stand on end. At the mothers' meetings it was worse. I could not help talking to the poor women of their family affairs when they were

so very anxious to confide them to me, nor help being so tickled by some of their homely sentiments as to go off into fits of laughter. I demoralized them by my stories of colonial cottage life-what the fathers' earnings were a week, and how the children had hot meat at every meal not making them discontented, poor, patient souls, but fascinating their imagination to that degree that they paid no more heed to the good books that Eleanor read to them than if they had all been deaf. In the National School I did the children's sewing for them, instead of scolding them for pricking their fingers and soiling their work; and I gave pennies of my own surreptitiously to members of the clothing club, who were behindhand in their payments—nay, I was too colonial to insult anybody with coppers, and gave whole

shillings at a time in a most reckless manner—which, as Eleanor declared, with tears in her eyes, was enough to destroy the moral usefulness of the best club that ever was.

The only parochial institution that I think I really served was aunt Kate's little crèche, a tiny nursery of two rooms, where eight or ten babies were taken care of on week days, while their mothers were out at work. It was on such a very small scale that only one paid nurse was employed, who had enough to do to prepare the children's food, and to keep them and the place clean; the nursing and amusing of the infants was undertaken by a few ladies of the parish, two of whom attended together for half a day in turn with the rest. By a new arrangement of the table of regulations, Eleanor and I were classed

together, and Monday mornings and Thursday afternoons were allotted to us. Anything more inexpressibly comical than the business we undertook on these days I cannot imagine. The solemnity with which Eleanor cuddled her babies to sleep, and gave them their bottles, and patted their backs when they had had too much (in those cases where mothers did not visit them during the day), and the patient suffering that she underwent with the bigger ones, by reason of their ingenuity for mischief and their poverty of pockethandkerchiefs, kept me in a chronic state of effervescent mirth that was far more exhausting than the share of work that fell to me.

I took to the *crèche* with ardent enthusiasm. I became a munificent subscriber, of course (a pound went a long way in

the balance-sheet of that institution); and I developed a capacity for making children happy that the best manager of children amongst us could not rival. I did not manage them, poor little souls, half so much as they managed me. If thev caught sight of me in the streets and lanes they flew at me with shrieks of welcome—never waiting to bob a curtsey, as they did to Eleanor. They loved me, bless their little hearts! but they had not a grain of respect for me. They tore my dresses, and towsled my hair, and begrimed my ruffles, so that I went home from the nursery more dilapidated even than I used to return from my bush rambles and scrambles in the old days. But if my moral influence was not all that could be desired, I know that the village crèche was more popular in my time than it ever was before or since.

These were our serious occupations. Our amusements were manifold, but of a staid and orderly nature. Tea in the schoolroom, and blind man's buff with the little girls under Miss Müller's supervision (and Miss Müller, though the soul of good nature, allowed no romping in her department); excursions with my father here and there: botanical rambles in the lanes and fields, and boating and fishing expeditions; a leisurely exchange of calls, and small dinner and badminton parties, with the neighbouring clergy and squireens; penny readings in the village schoolroom; plenty of Mudie's newest issues about the house. It was, altogether, a sweet, quiet, modest English life, with all necessary domestic and intellectual refinements; a life that mother loved from the bottom of her heart, and that was undoubtedly good for me.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW OUR "HEARL" CAME HOME.

And so a couple of months passed, and the golden autumn stole upon us. Such an autumn! It was worth coming all the way from Australia only to have one look at those tawny woods—one look at that great red harvest moon blazing through the dewy nightfall over the berried hedgerows and the whitening fields of corn. Mother had talked about the English spring; perhaps I was a little late in seeing it to advantage. But the English autumn at Brookleigh was more lovely

than words can say. Those rimy mornings with the fog and the sunshine struggling together, and all the pearly hoar-frost twinkling on leaves and twigs, and spiders' webs, and meadow gossamer—those solemn, long-drawn, misty sunsets, not bright and positive like the transparent air-colours of Australian evening skies, but so much richer in hints of hidden beauty, flooding all about the red and russet trees of Brookleigh Park, and the dark luxuriance of the village lanes—the sweet, soft, mellow days, when the little birds that I loved to hear took to singing some of their spring songs again, and when we went blackberrying with Miss Müller and the children, and found so many treasures besides the blackberries that I had never read or dreamed of-what a great poem it all was!

I sat at the luncheon-table one day, with my elbows planted on either side of my empty plate, and my head in my hands, staring through the open window at a restless flock of swallows that seemed to be looking for something about the garden that they entirely failed to find. Mother had gone away to write to Mrs. Smith, and had asked me if I had any message; and I was feeling sore and sorrowful. Never would I speak of Tom to her or any one; never would I stoop to evade the hard bargain that I had entered into, even to the extent of sending messages through her hands (which she would have transmitted faithfully, if they had not been too audacious); nevertheless, every time the Australian mail went out my yearning heart went after it, and a passion of helpless misery took possession

of me for a little while, such as drove me sometimes to clench my hands and stamp my foot (in private) before I could work off the paroxysm comfortably.

"Oh, Nell, how I wish I was a swallow for a few months!" I burst out suddenly, addressing my placid cousin, who was investigating the contents of the village baby-clothes bag, which was about to be lent to an expectant mother, now sitting waiting for it in the hall.

"One—two—three—oh, what a bad colour! My dear Kitty, wish something better than that!"

"You see they are all ready to go," I went on; "and I don't suppose it matters much where they go to if they are warm, and have enough to eat. I would follow the ships, and settle in the rigging when I was tired, until I got there——"

"Kitty, would you mind fetching a bodkin and putting a fresh tape into the neck of this little gown," Eleanor interrupted, too earnestly preoccupied to understand or heed what I was saying. "The bag only came home last night, and see how badly Mrs. Simpson has used the things! I should like to put them right before Mrs. Jones takes them."

"Mrs. Jones had better call or send again, then," said I, "for one of the flannels has been scorched, and it is rent all down the skirt."

"Dear me, is it? We must get an entire new set soon, I think. Well, I'll give her the bag now, and we will keep back what wants mending, and take them to her afterwards."

Accordingly we replaced a few missing strings and buttons, closed the bag, and

delivered it to Mrs. Jones, who received it with grateful curtseys. Then Eleanor, who never allowed procrastination to steal her time when she had good works on hand, insisted on sitting down to darn the flannel there and then, that Mrs. Jones's mind might be made easy by knowing that all her preparations were completed.

"We may as well make a sewing afternoon of it," said she, "and then we can take them all to her to-morrow when we have our drive. You had better go on with the almshouse petticoats, hadn't you?"

"I can't, I can't," I replied, rising restlessly, and stretching my arms above my head. "I must go out, and I'd rather walk than drive. Do you think I might have this cake, Nelly? The children turn up their noses at it because it has seeds in. I should like to take it to my little crèche brats."

"Certainly, dear," said Eleanor; "only I'm sure it is very bad for such young children to have so many rich things. Why, it was only Monday you took them a dishful of tarts. You'll have them all ill, if you don't mind."

"This won't make them ill, at any rate. They might eat it all day and it would do them good. You should see the Australian children at a Sunday school treat, Eleanor, having dinner and tea off pound cake and puff pastry. They wouldn't look at a seed loaf like this. Why, I have even known them complain of being offered the indignity of sandwiches—ham sandwiches, you understand—cut thin and buttered."

"The Australian children die," retorted Eleanor, "and no wonder."

I started off with my cake, under no apprehension of endangering the lives of the Brookleigh children by a surfeit of rich food. It was not my day for visiting the nursery, but I liked to look in occasionally, to see how other people managed it, and to take anything I could lay my hands on in the shape of sweetmeat to compensate the little ones for their loss of me. When I opened the cottage door a chorus of fretful whinings met my ear. The youngest baby lay on her back in a cradle, crying for the bottle whose tube had dropped out of her mouth; the eldest was sobbing and sniffing in the corner in disgrace. Two, who should have been asleep on a mattress, were waking up with the noise; and two more had got the

nurse's pincushion, and were poking pins into one another's mouths. The ladies in charge were the village doctor's wife and daughter. The latter, utterly indifferent to what was going on around her, was frowning over a half-knitted silk stocking which she held within a few inches of her nose; and her mother, with a squealing infant dangling over her arm, was absorbed in helping her to pick up a row of dropped stitches.

"Johnny pulled Miss Edgar's needle out—wasn't he a naughty boy!" exclaimed the younger lady, when I had offered her a brusque salutation.

"Johnny is used to being played with," I replied, trying not to be rude in my indignation. "You surely cannot do that fine knitting and attend to the babies too, Miss Edgar?"

"Oh yes, I can, when they are good. But they are very naughty to-day," said she irritably. "I don't know what has come to them."

The poor little brats! I took them off her hands for an hour, and they soon grew good, though they made a noise that Mrs. Edgar declared was deafening. I warmed the baby's bottle, and laid her down on her side to suck and snooze in comfort; I rescued the pincushion, and also rescued Johnny, washed all their hands and faces, and then sat down amongst them, and fed them with seed cake until there was not a crumb left. No doubt Mrs. and Miss Edgar felt that I took great liberties, as, in truth, I did; but they did not resent The younger lady chatted it openly. pleasantly about the fashions—apropos of the gay stocking she was knitting; and Mrs. Edgar, having satisfied the cravings of another bottle baby, dropped friendly little remarks into the brief lulls and pauses of our uproar.

"I suppose," she said presently, "you have heard the news about Lord Westbrook, Miss Chamberlayne, your uncle being so intimate at the Hall?"

"What news?" I inquired, checking the too vigorous exercise of Johnny's fine lungs by clasping my hands over his mouth. "We know he has been shooting in Scotland, because he sent us a hamper of game; and we believe that Lady Westbrook has never got any further than Paris since she started from Rome."

"Ah, well, she is in England now, and they are both coming home immediately. Some of the servants and luggage have already arrived. It is a very quiet way of coming back, after having been absent so long; but Barrett says Lord Westbrook has a great dislike to anything in the shape of a demonstration."

- "So I should think."
- "What, do you know him?"
- "Yes. He was on board ship with us for a little while, and afterwards he dined at my aunt's house in London."

A torrent of excited questions followed this indiscreet admission, and I was kept answering them until past four o'clock, though I was burning to run home with a piece of news of so much consequence to all the rectory people; and when at last I did escape, I had to use a little stratagem to do so courteously. When I closed the door of the nursery behind me (hearing wails of regret for my departure that went to my heart), my first desire was to get the news

confirmed. As I had it, it was not much more than rumour, Mrs. Edgar having heard it from her husband, who had heard it from farmer Hobbs, whose daughter had been told by Mrs. Brand, the housekeeper at the Hall, on the occasion of her having taken up twenty dozen of eggs, which was an altogether abnormal quantity to be required at one time, unless the family was to be cooked for.

At first I thought I would run through the park and see Mrs. Brand herself. She was a dear old lady who had given us afternoon tea in her charming sitting-room many and many a time when we were fagged with combined parish work and midsummer heat, and was always delighted with half an hour's gossip; but what I had ard of the imminence of the return of he family" deterred me. It would never

do to be running over Lady Westbrook in the big vestibules and corridors, and having her asking Mrs. Brand who that young person was. Neither would I apply to Mr. Barrett, the agent, though I should have to pass his house on my way home; for there were three Miss Barretts, who all took a jealous and tender interest in their young lord's affairs, and a strong-minded Mrs. Barrett, who imagined that every impudent female had matrimonial designs upon him, not even excepting my modest cousin, Eleanor, who had hardly spoken to him half a dozen times since her childhood, and who would never have thought of marrying anybody till he had very plainly shown that he thought of marrying her. I decided to walk round to the west lodge, where old Brown lived, who, I was sure, would not have been kept in ignorance of any family affairs that the upper servants of the Hall were cognizant of.

Old Brown in his boyhood had been page to Lord Westbrook's grandmother; in youth and middle age he had been his father's confidential body servant, through all the vicissitudes of that gentleman's rather wild career; and now, in his palsied second childhood, he was living in ease and comfort, in a charming little Elizabethan cottage, with twisted chimneys and a mullioned window, fit for a prince, in company with an ancient ex-waiting woman, to whom he had offered his hand when, as he said, "he wasn't fit for nothing else." His cottage was carpeted and curtained, his cupboard provided with the best of everything, from the cellars and larders of the Hall; and all he had to do was to open the great gates now and then—and he needn't have done that, seeing that a strapping grand-daughter of Mrs. Brown's lived with them, only he looked upon it as a high duty and privilege that it would never do for him to forego as long as he had a leg to stand on.

To my surprise, I found the great gates standing wide, with the two stone monsters that guarded them from the top of two mighty stone pedestals grinning vacantly into the blue and sunny air, like the gurgoyles whose occupation of spouting rainwater into the churchyard was gone. And old Brown was standing out upon the gravelled roadway that swept up through the green slopes and russet glades of the park, to the great house towering grey in the distance, with a flag flying over its chimneys and gables; and as I approached him he did not heed me in the least.

- "Good day. Mr. Brown. You surely are not setting the gates open for Lord Westbrook res:"
- "The Earl, miss," he replied, turning to look at me for a moment, and laying a reproachful emphasis on the insulted title, "is a-coming home, with her ladyship the countess, this very day, and I am a-setting the gates open for him."
- Old Brown had never lost his rural vernacular, unless he had regained it in his old age, in spite of having associated with the cream of quality all his life.
- "But not new." I exclaimed. "Not this moment."
- "Miss." replied he, solemnly, "the carriage went to the station two hours ago,
 deg-cart for the servants, and the
 the luggage; and the train must
 an in this long time."

- "You don't say so!"
- "Yes, I do. We got a telegraph this morning that they was to be met—the open carriage and the two old bays. Ah, when we used to come home, it was four grey horses as you couldn't match in all the country-side, and postillions in red jackets. Things is very different now. We spent a deal in our time, there's no denyin'; and this hearl he don't seem to care like about spendin' money, and he's in the rights of it too."
- "Used you always to speak of your late master as 'the earl,' Mr. Brown?"
- "Well, miss, what we says, in the privacy of life so to speak, may be just 'my lord,' or it mayn't; but other people," waving his hand in the direction of the village, "they has to be taught proper respect. They must be made to know that

there's a difference between a family as is hearls, and a family as is only barons. You understand that, don't you, miss?"

"Oh yes, that's perfectly clear, of course."

"Very well, then," said old Brown. And, though argument appeared at an end, he evidently had more to say, only just then the sound of wheels and measured rhythm of hoofs on the hard road became audible in the distance.

"There they be!" the old man almost shouted, tearing off his hat and hobbling towards the road. And I looked hurriedly around for shelter, feeling decidedly de trop. The door of the little house stood open, and I ran into the sitting-room, where I could watch the arrival from the mullioned window, apologising to Mrs. Brown, who at the same moment marched

out into the porch with Susan, her granddaughter, both arrayed in their Sunday best.

In a few minutes the carriage entered the gateway and stopped before the lodge, while Mr. and Mrs. Brown advanced to make their humble salutations. Lady Westbrook was stout and florid, and turned a pleasant face upon the old couple. I was prepossessed by her kindly manner and by hearing her ask after the ailments and general affairs of several of our poor parish people, in a way that showed she had kept them all in her memory throughout her travels. Lord Westbrook waited until his mother had said her say, and then he swung himself to the ground, and told her, if she did not mind driving on by herself, he would walk up in half an hour. "I'm going to ask Mrs. Brown for a few matches," said he, "and have a cigar on the way."

"Do, my dear boy," responded the motherly woman. "It is a lovely time for walking, and the place looks beautiful, Brown. I think so whenever I come home."

"It do, my lady, it do," said old Brown.

"And may your ladyship live many years to enjoy it."

And then the carriage drove on; and Mrs. Brown escorted her noble visitor into the little parlour with much pride and diffidence. He gave a surprised start when he saw me (trying to hide my disconcerted visage under the brim of the Mother Hubbard with which I was just beginning to astonish the natives of Brookleigh, who had never seen a hat of that shape before) and then he strode forward eagerly.

"Oh, how glad I am!" he exclaimed.

"This is a welcome home that I never expected."

"No more did I," I replied, holding out my hand frankly. "I didn't know until this moment that you were coming back to-day."

"Didn't you really? I wonder Miss Armytage did not find it out; she has been so long expecting me to do—what England expects every man to do, you know."

"Your duty—yes, I know that," I laughed. "She tries to keep us all up to the mark in that respect."

"She thinks I have been neglecting my duty in staying so much away from my property," he went on, with a little anxious gravity.

"How do you know she thinks so?"

"I have gleaned her mind from sundry parochial reports that she has supplied my mother with from time to time. But, to tell the truth, I have had to deny myself what would have been a great pleasure, for economy's sake. It is an expensive house to keep up, and, as Brown knows, of late years it has been necessary to save as much and spend as little as possible."

"Of course, I know, my lord," broke in Brown; "but I don't talk about it to other people."

"Quite right, Brown, quite right. Are you going?"—seeing me moving towards the door. "Let me come with you a little way, may I? Good-bye for the present, Mrs. Brown."

"The matches, my lord—you are forgetting the matches," cried the old woman, HOW OUR "HEARL" CAME HOME. 95 trotting after him with a box in her hand.

"Never mind—oh, you have brought them—thanks. Two or three will do."

And so we sauntered out between the great stone pillars, on which those stone monsters sat on their tails, and pawed the air, and grinned into vacancy, and defied Cuvier. And Mr. and Mrs. Brown looked after us with deep interest, mingled with much perplexity.

As for what we talked about, that was nothing; as for the steps we took towards establishing friendly and confidential relations, they were just as long strides as circumstances and modest natures permitted. It was a quiet piece of road, and we met nobody but children returning from school, except Eleanor at the rectory gate looking out for my return; who, when

she saw Lord Westbrook, greeted him as he had greeted me—"Oh, how glad I am!" though her gladness sprang from quite other sources than his.

CHAPTER V.

AUNT KATE'S GARDEN PARTY.

For a little while Brookleigh village was in a great commotion, what with calls and return calls, carriages flashing to and fro, receptions of Lady Westbrook at the schools and the crèche, first appearance at church, and so on. Some stately dinner parties were given, at only one of which (our own) I took part, on which occasion I had no tête-à-tête with my lord-no communication whatever, indeed, beyond what was carried between us by the indefinite language of a song; for he was

entirely monopolized by his ancient neighbours, and I had had a lesson in London that I was not likely to forget. When these were all over, however, and two or three small batches of sporting guests had come to the Hall and gone, I had seen a good deal of both Lady Westbrook and her son, and I had come to understand—without, of course, appearing to acknowledge the fact—that I was, in their estimation, by far the most important unit in the rectory group.

Ah me! what a pity it is that when things are pleasant they cannot remain so! How I had enjoyed myself since the family had come to the Hall! And now, before the autumn was half over, I was beginning to feel uneasy and unhappy, and almost to wish that it had remained as it was before, with only Mrs. Brand to

dispense hospitality in the shape of afternoon tea in the housekeeper's parlour.

It was on a lovely day in September that aunt Kate had her last garden party of the season, and she declared when she toiled up to her room to dress for dinner that it had "gone off" more satisfactorily than any she had ever given. Mother said it was Lady Westbrook's charming chatter, which permeated the whole assembly; aunt Kate thought it was the delicious weather, which seemed to have been made on purpose; uncle Armytage attributed it to the presence of our noble bachelor amongst a good many marriageable girls; and father said it was the cups. I concocted the cups, after a little wheedling of my uncle, who was portentously solemn and obstinate whenever his cellar was in question, and didn't like to see

choice claret what he called "messed." They were made from some of Tom's Oxford recipes, given to me "in confidence," and when uncle Armytage smacked his lips in dignified approbation, and asked me to tell him the secret of their superiority over the ordinary cups of the household, I was under the painful necessity of refusing his request.

We were very busy all the morning preparing for this momentous entertainment. We cleared the poor children's little croquet apparatus away (after many threatenings), and arranged another set of lawn tennis courts in its place. Daddy made outlines with chalk on the close-shaven turf and rigged up the netting, and sorted rackets and basketfuls of balls, and then helped us to place some newly-purchased garden chairs in the most

101

seductive nooks and corners. Mother and Eleanor assisted aunt Kate with all her little tables, and her precious cups and saucers, and flower decorations, and so on; and Bertie and I gathered the fruit (Bertie was paying us a visit, and had tied himself to my apron-strings), and disposed it in sundry baskets and on divers china dishes with the most artistic effect. ought to have been a successful party, as I told aunt Kate. At three o'clock I ran up to my room, and made myself radiant in a faint blue batiste, that had a great deal of fine kilting and wide rich ribbon about it, a modified Gainsborough hat trimmed with blue, and a breast-knot of cream and crimson rosebuds, that Bertie had arranged very prettily with some red-brown autumn leaves. I did not like my charming costume any the less because it reminded me of another costume of the same colour that I had made for Mrs. Jones's baby.

Poor Mrs. Jones, who lived in a squalid hovel far away beyond the common, with an indifferent husband and half a dozen children, had become to me a sort of representative of that large class of English cottage people, whose pinching poverty was so incredibly bitter to me.

Brookleigh village was singularly well-to-do, I was told, what with good land, good landlords, and a lucky scarcity of democratic institutions (such as factories, newspapers, and dissenting chapels); but, all the same, it afforded me a glimpse of the hopeless misery of the very poor, and the terrible extent of it, that saddened the bright prosperity of my own happy life more than I can say. Without her

wide experience, I began to feel, with dear Miss Thackeray, as I ruined my father for pocket money and yet never could keep a shilling, that "the wayfarers were lying all along the road, and the Samaritan passing by had only one ass to carry them away upon." The crèche was the only little ass in Brookleigh that could carry any burden to speak of from off poor Mrs. Jones's overladen back; and when it brought her little fortnight-old baby to me (wrapped in a tattered shawl and the lean arms of a sister not much bigger than itself), I took it under my wing, and determined that it, at any rate, should have none of the roughness of life that I could spare it. It was the sweetest little babe—like a delicate little lily on the bosom of that gaunt, brown, toil-worn mother, and I loved it with a fervour that

would have made Spring unspeakably jealous if he had only been by to see. I never trusted Mrs. and Miss Edgar with it: either I went to the nursery on their day, or I fetched it away to the rectory, or I took it for a drive in Eleanor's pony carriage. Many a time I had trudged over the common in the wind and rain to carry it home, lest it should not be kept warm and dry by the lean-armed sister. when it was to be christened I made it with my own hands a frock, a blue cloak, and a blue hood, which, when I delivered them to Mrs. Jones, touched the poor woman to tears. Tt. should not be christened in borrowed charity clothes if I could help it, I told Eleanor warmly. when she hinted that the much-washed flannel shawl of the lending bag, which assumed to be white, was more suitable for the occasion.

I smiled to myself as I thought of the christening, and a colour stole into my face that rivalled the hue of Bertie's rosebuds. It had taken place on the previous Sunday, under rather memorable circumstances: and it occurred to me now that Lord Westbrook had been present, and that I had not seen him since. No one but myself sat in the rectory pew that Sunday afternoon. Aunt and mother stayed at home from habit; father, also from habit, was having a walk; Miss Müller was teaching catechism to the children in the school-room; and Eleanor had a headache, and was lying down. All the servants. were in church, in their own particular pew; and I sat alone in the pew of the family, in aunt Kate's softly-cushioned corner, the only person in the chancel, save one-Lord Westbrook. What brought

him to church in the afternoon I'm sure I can't say—though perhaps I can guess. I was there to see my little blue-coated baby christened.

As it chanced, uncle Armytage had gone for a holdiday to join a yachting party in the Western Highlands for a fortnight, and his place had been taken by a very stiff-starched young man, who had advertised himself in the Guardian. This young man had commended himself to Eleanor, mainly, I think, because he held sound views as to the eastward position; but he had not got on with me, nor had I with him. He was priggish about his Church principles, and I had no Church principles to speak of, in his sense of the term, the consequence of which was that he mourned over me as a benighted individual, and I considered him an ill-mannered person, and snubbed him accordingly.

On this special Sunday afternoon we came into conflict in a very curious way. When the time for the christening arrived, and Mr. and Mrs. Jones came out of their pew—he in a clean smock frock, and she in her well-patched gingham, carrying little Katherine well held out, for the due display of her finery-Mr. Benham went down from the lectern to the font, surveyed the christening party severely, whispered to Mrs. Jones, who hung her head and seemed about to cry, and then, to my intense surprise, turned to march up the aisle again. For a moment I could not guess what had gone wrong, and then I rememberd that a girl-baby required two godmothers, and Mrs. Jones alone had presented herself in that capacity. The

poor thing had had six babies christened before, and ought to have been acquainted with the rubric, but either her memory had failed her, or uncle Armytage had not been very strict. Now she was being sent back to her seat in disgrace, in the face of all her neighbours, Jones trailing after her with loud-scraping hobnailed boots, hanging his head sullenly. more than I could stand. I rose in my seat, feeling bold and angry, and marched down the church like a high wind, stopping the whole party as they were scattering from the font. "I suppose it is necessary to have a second godmother?" I inquired of Mr. Benham, in a tone not so decorously hushed as it might have been.

"Certainly it is" he replied, raising his eyes with a look that was intended to remind me of my unseemly presumption in interfering with the execution of his duty and the course of Divine service.

"I will stand then," I said promptly; and I beckoned back Mrs. Jones, and took the baby from her arms.

"O miss!" she whispered, with wide eyes of wonder and gratitude, "will you really?"

And for a few seconds Mr. Benham stared at me as if he thought I had taken leave of my senses. But I stood erect, holding my little one tightly, and showed them that I meant it. I certainly was rather staggered when, as the service proceeded, I became aware of the nature of the responsibilities that I had so rashly undertaken. But I made inward vows that I would look after little Katherine—that I would put her to school, and

perhaps take her to be my maid and companion when I was a middle-aged matron and she had grown up; and I had much immediate satisfaction in the intense pride and pleasure of Mr. and Mrs. Jones, who could scarcely follow the service for the flutter of delight that I had put them into. (I may here state that my little god-daughter died of croup before she was a year old, and that I had no opportunity for putting all my schemes into practice.)

When the christening was over I walked back to my seat in the chancel, and encountered Lord Westbrook's eyes watching my approach, with the suspicion of that old amused smile lurking in their friendly depths. I began to feel in a vague way that I had made myself ridiculous, and the blood rushed in a red tide all over my face. During the rest of

the service I turned as much of my back to him and the congregation generally as circumstances permitted; and when it was over I tried to escape home through the rectory gate unseen. In that I failed. however, by reason of the obligation that lay upon me to reassure Mr. and Mrs. Jones as to my intentions, and to show everybody that I was not ashamed of my godchild. I held it in my arms in the church porch as the villagers passed out, smiling and bobbing curtseys; and when I gave it back to its mother I kissed its fair little sleeping face and promised her that I would do my duty by it as well as I knew how. As Lord Westbrook, according to immemorial custom, went out of church first (none of the villagers. would have budged until he had done so, if he had sat in his pew for an hour), it followed that he had plenty of time to walk round to the chancel door which led into the rectory garden. (He, too, had a chancel door, but he never used it when he went to church without his mother.) As I was slipping out into the shady churchyard, I caught sight of him quietly standing on the path a few steps ahead of me, and I knew that I could not escape him.

"Don't scold me!" I implored, laughing and holding up my hands, feeling very much as I did when he caught me at my shop-keeping on board ship. "I know I shall have a talking to when I get home, as soon as Eleanor hears of it. She says I am demoralizing the parish, and I suppose I am. I daresay I have just gone and encouraged them all to be careless, and shall be having them asking me to be godmother to all the babies now."

- "Scold you!" he cried warmly. "That's very likely, isn't it? And the parish is blessed to have you in it, though you may break every regulation under the sun."
- "Regulations shouldn't be broken, though; I know that much, when I give myself time to think of it. But you don't think I made a donkey of myself? I'm sure Mr. Benham does."
- "Never mind what Mr. Benham thinks. He doesn't know you. I do."
- "Do you know me?" I inquired, laughing.
 - "Perfectly," he responded, promptly.
- "There can't be much in me, if you come to the end of it so soon. Why, Lord Westbrook, do you know how many hours we have had to become acquainted in?"

"I don't care about hours. That is a poor way of calculating," said he. "And as to coming to the end of you—I didn't mean that, of course. I am only at the beginning of you yet. But—if a draper showed you a corner of a bale of stuff, you could tell if it was silk or fustian, couldn't you?"

"I don't know that I could," I replied demurely. "I don't think I exactly know what fustian is. It ranks in my mind with pudasoy, and bombazine, and samite, and those kinds of traditionary material that one never sees in shops."

However, he knew that he had indicated his meaning with quite sufficient clearness, and said no more until we joined my mother and aunt, who came out to meet us at the garden gate.

And now, as I dressed myself in my

pretty pale-blue gown, and fastened Bertie's rosebuds at my throat, I could not help looking forward to a renewal of this conversation with a mixture of desire and apprehension that was not like the comfortable freedom and abandonment of our earlier intercourse-my part of it, at any rate. Things had been very pleasant, but now I began to think, with a real sense of regret and trouble, that the pleasantness was not going to last much longer. Yet I did not want to cut short what was left of it, whatever was to happen when it was done. Without conscious coquetry I wished to keep that friendship where it was as long as possible. I would not think of it, in fact, or do anything to meet trouble half way. went downstairs with my gloves in my hands, and took a peep first at my cups

to see if Bertie had iced them well, and put out the proper quantity of champagne and seltzer-water for the herbs and liquors that I had compounded with such care; and then I joined the family on the lawn, where the guests were beginning to arrive—to whom uncle Armytage, newly home from his tour, was holding forth with stately enthusiasm upon the grandeur of the Jura mountains, and the loveliness of the Kyles of Bute.

Among the first to come were Lady Westbrook and her son, he in cool white cricketing flannels, in which he looked very handsome, I thought. Lady Westbrook was installed in the garden chair of honour, which was in no retired nook, but was well sheltered from the sun, and she very quickly gathered all the company round her with the attraction of her glib

and witty tongue. Eleanor and I used to liken her to Madame de Staël, she was so clever, so vivacious, and so talkative, and so Frenchy in her ideas and ways. She had the advantage of Madame de Staël, however, in being a very goodlooking woman, and she had never written anything but charmingly picturesque letters. Schiller would not have got tired of her tongue, and have complained that he had to "make himself all ear to follow her," for her talk flowed on like a musical brook in summer, and it was a rest and refreshment, as well as a tonic and stimulant, to those who listened to it. I listened to-day for a little while, and then, somehow, Lord Westbrook inveigled me away to show him some treasures that uncle Armytage had brought home. We found ourselves by-and-by in the conservatory—and a very hot place it was—talking and dawdling, in utter forgetfulness of the business of the day.

"I have bought a new picture," he said,
"that I want you to see. It came down
this morning, and I want you to show me
where to hang it. It is only a group of
hills with the sun setting behind them,
and the light breaking through an unseen
gap. I thought it would remind you of
those Murray ranges that you were talking
about the other day. Will you come tomorrow?"

"I don't know—it is crèche day. But I should like to see it,"

"Try and come, before crèche time begins, or after it is over. I will ask your mother, shall I? It is a long time since you have been up, and you have not seen half the pictures yet."

"I think I have, except the family portraits."

"Oh, they are in the attics," said Lord Westbrook, "because they are very ugly, except the two Vandykes and the Lely in the library."

"So Mrs. Brand told me. And I never heard of noble ancestors being treated so disrespectfully."

"They are rolled up with the greatest care," he said. "But I have not room for ugly pictures, even when they are by great masters, and I don't like to see them. I know my 'school' is not orthodox, but, at any rate, my pictures are beautiful. You know they are, for you have the courage to keep a taste of your own. I don't much care what other people think of them."

"They are," I said warmly. "It is just

such a collection as I should wish to have round me if I had such a great house to live in—bright, breathing, living scenes and faces that I can understand. I hate Dutch kitchens and cottage interiors, all untidy and squalid, with vegetables lying about the floor; and I hate farmyards, all in a mess with pigs and cows; and I don't like fat Madonnas simpering, nor yet those great brawny Raphael apostles." I broke off in alarm at my own audacity, and added hastily, "Though I won't decide about them until I see them in their own places, and have time to study them well."

"I think we are a couple of heretics," Lord Westbrook said, smiling. "That comes of having lived in foreign parts, as our old butler said when I put the ancestors into the attic."

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Westbrook; I ought to have been helping Eleanor."

He opened the outer door of the conservatory, and we went into the garden, where we were speedily absorbed in the general company and the mysteries of lawn tennis. We played together, both as friends and enemies; we sat out together, and scored for sides; we drank claret cup together in the hall, and iced coffee in the shrubbery, and tea at mother's little table under the chestnut tree; and we had several sauntering walks about the place. But I took care to have somebody else, if it was only Miss Edgar, near me, not to run the risk of hearing what Lord Westbrook wished.

When everybody was gone, and we went upstairs in the dusk to make a rather slovenly dinner toilette, I had the tingle of his last hand-clasp in my fingers, and the sound of his goodbye in my ears—so different from the goodbyes of all the other people. And through the sleepy evening, and all the uneasy wakeful night, I was haunted by his grave eyes, full of wistful tenderness, and all that they tried to ask and to tell in the moment of parting, when we stood together at the garden gate. Ah, dear friend, I knew very well what you wished; and the knowledge made me more miserable than anything had had power to do since the day that I was separated from Tom.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

November found us in our own house at last—a lovely, old-fashioned, hoary-gabled farmhouse, just outside Brookleigh village, which Lord Westbrook had to let just when mother took a fancy that she should like to live there. Father took it, and the land appertaining, under some temporary and abnormal arrangement, which admitted of our giving it up when we were tired of it; and within a few weeks afterwards it was all in order and furnished (for money can buy time as well as other things), and

we had migrated from the rectory, and were settled there. A very pretty place it was-quiet, quaint, picturesque, and comfortable; well-gravelled as to garden paths, but with high shrubberies belting it about (to hide the proximity of farmyards and buildings, that were a little too close for choice, perhaps) and noble old red and yellow trees dropping leaf-drifts all around it. It had queer dark passages and staircases, low ceilings, numberless cupboards and corners, rooms leading one through the other-the maximum of space, with the minimum of convenience, I should say; but for all that was as full of comfort as a sweet old-fashioned grange could be. (We called it the "Moated Grange," though it had not the ghost of a moat near it.) My own chamber was in a tall gable that looked across towards the

church—only twenty minutes' walk away—and it had a real lattice casement, with ivy poking through the framework quite into the room, and deserted martins' nests clinging thickly to the wide eaves. I reached it by going up a corkscrew staircase and through two other rooms, but I did not mind that. One of the rooms was kept for boxes, and the other was fitted up for Eleanor whenever she liked to sleep there. It was rather a lonely eyrie, but I did not mind that either. I was not much troubled with nerves; and the further away I got from other people the nearer I felt to Tom.

Mother and I had a great deal of work to do for a little while, in spite of our many workmen; and I was sufficiently absorbed in the interest of my occupation (unpacking and arranging all our Narraporwidgee treasures) to be able to ignore the existence, or rather the importance, of Lord Westbrook for the time. But when we were settled, and regular home life began—a little less of parish work with Eleanor, and a little more of reading, and needlework, and housekeeping with mother (who would have been ashamed of me if I had not known how to cook a dinner as well as order one)—then I found that he would not be ignored, neither himself nor his importance, as an element in my life.

The winter went over, having brought, with the ice and snow, a shadow of care and trouble upon my heart that did not melt away as they did; and the first year of my separation from Tom was at an end. What a strange, long, full year it had been! How fast I had been learning life!

On his birthday, towards dusk in the afternoon, I was sitting by myself on a low chair by the drawing-room fire, thinking of it all. Mother had gone to see aunt Kate, to talk over a project that had been broached by Lady Westbrook, of introducing her (mother) and me to the Queen during the approaching season—a project on which the daughterless, gay old woman, who was fond of me, had set her heart, and which had touched the vanity of both my parents in its most susceptible Mother's head was full of my white court dress, and how she should have her pearls set for me, and, I daresay, of all manner of ambitious hopes and schemes for my glorification, though she did not own to it. Daddy made no effort whatever to conceal his interest and pride in my prospective honours, and was par-

ticularly anxious to impress upon us, in reference to our plans, that he overflowed with money that he did not know what to do with. Just now he had taken himself off to some farming business of his own, intending to call for her at the rectory when she had had her gossip out. I, left at home to nurse a sore throat, had something better to occupy my thoughts than a court dress and a London season, though I was as open to the fascinations of those charming novelties as anybody. I could only think of Tom to-day-of his lonely birthday at Booloomooloo, and of his birthday a year ago, and his birthday I busied myself with a year to come. calculations as to the difference of time between him and me, and I came to the conclusion that he would be having his breakfast just now, while I sat thinking 130

about him in the gathering wintry dusk. Was he thinking of me too, I wondered, as he drank his coffee and chipped his eggs? and remembering that I had nearly seen the day over that with him had not long begun? Of course he was. Somehow, through all that long separation and silence, I no more suspected that he could be changed by it than that I could be changed myself. I had not "learned life" so fast, as yet, as to learn to believe only in the evidence of my corporeal senses. knew as well as I knew that I was alive and thinking of him, that, if he were alive, he was thinking of me-looking forward with me to that happy goal which we had reached half way, and looking back with me to the starting point whence we had set forth on our probation with such sad but determined hearts.

A whole year ago!—half the long score wiped off. When he held me in his arms and told me that the time would not be so long as I thought, I never anticipated that half of it would slip away so rapidly. Dear arms!—I tried to fancy they were round me now. I laid my cheek upon the back of the little chair, and remembered the feel of the rough tweed shoulder, and the strong, large hand that held my willing head down to rest there for the last time. What a day it was! So sunny and soft, with the magpies gabbling in the garden outside, and subtle flower scents in all the summer air. How different this day was, which found me alone, and pining for him, on the other side of the My garden now was dank and world. sodden, with a chill English thaw, beginning to freeze up again in a bi

east wind, that swished through the dripping laurels and the bare-armed trees, whose old limbs groaned and creaked like the dismantled masts of a storm-driven The sap of young spring was ship. beginning to stir, no doubt, beginning to swell out in purple buds and boles, that had promise of green leafage such as no Narraporwidgee gum or wattle knew of. Delicate spears were piercing the brown earth-crust in every flower-bed, and tufts of snowdrops and crocuses, and little pink and blue hepaticas coming up full of courage and constancy and the tenderest beauty. But the cold twilight had covered them over; I could only see the leafless branches clawing and scratching in the wind, with a background of grey cottonwool, that perhaps would become snow before the night was over, and longstalked, glossy ivy leaves tapping and flapping against the windows.

Within, too, how different! Instead of pale French paper, dark wainscot of immemorial oak: instead of the sensuous Australian warmth and sunshine, the thick wintry dusk, and the flicker of the fire—a round coal fire boxed up in iron bars, and not great blazing logs of red gum and sheoak, piled wide and deep on the open hearth, such as Tom and I were used to. Would it be like this next year, I wondered? And would be come to me at this hour? or when? And how? "When you get up in the morning, you may be sure you will meet me somewhere before night." That was what he had said. But would he know where to find me? Supposing daddy should take it into his head to go travelling just at that time? He had talked of spending Easter in Rome this very winter, only Lady Westbrook's scheme had put it out of his head. In that case I declared I would not budge; nothing should induce me to go further out of his reach than I could help. No, I would stay at Brookleigh, and sit by the fireside in the Moated Grange, like Mariana, and wait for him. Only, unlike Mariana, I should not have to wait in vain. I was quite satisfied about that.

And then I began to dream of that happy meeting—as I had dreamed of it perhaps a hundred and fifty times—sitting sideways on my chair, with my feet on the fender, my hands clasped round my knees, and my head resting on that imaginary tweed shoulder, which in reality was stuffed with horsehair and covered with modern "high art" needlework. Yes, I

saw it all, like one of Millais's pictures. I, in a black silk dress, with white lace round my throat and wrists, and the emeralds (though it were ever so much daytime) glowing like drops of green fire on my breast; and Tom, in his rough but well-cut grey suit, perhaps with an unbuttoned ulster, that he had not waited to take off, dropping away from his broad chest and his strong, straight legs, striding towards me as I rose from my chair to meet him—even to imagine that blessed moment was an ecstasy that almost made me gasp.

Daddy and mother were to have no place in the picture, of course. Daddy would be out of doors, in the natural course of things, and mother must be inveigled out somehow. If I could not manage it, I should have to confide in Eleanor or aunt Kate, and get

them to invent some pressing business. For the very cream of the whole affair would consist in their knowing nothing of it beforehand. We would obey them 'honourably as to the hard conditions they had imposed on us for two years, but when the two years were up, and they, perhaps, had forgotten all about the bargain, then we would confront them with it, and with the spectacle of our silent and steadfast constancy. Mother would come in, in her bonnet and furs, and exclaim, "What, Kitty, no lamps lit yet?" and then she would see that tall young fellow by the firelight, and wonder who he was. And Tom would get up from the sofa by my side, and say, "Have you forgotten me, Mrs. Chamberlayne? I have come to see Kitty; you said I might come in two years' time." And mother would stand there, rooted to the floor, and spell-bound with the intensity of her surprise. Then daddy would come in, and shake him by both hands, and blow his nose with great ostentation, and declare that he'd hanged if we didn't deserve one another. Yes, I knew how it would all be-the dinner we would have together, and the long, long talk in the drawing-room afterwards; and how he would go up to his room in the small hours of the morning, after talking in the smoking-room with daddy half the night, and wonder, as he passed a door he would think was mine (but which, of course, wouldn't be), if I were asleep, when he might know I should be too happy to be able to close my eyes. And he would find the little snowdrops and the white crocuses, that I had gathered to welcome him, shining, fresh, and pure

as a bridal bouquet, on his dressingtable.

"Lord Westbrook, miss," broke in the shrill voice of our rustic parlour-maid, like a sharp knife cutting through my web of dreams. I was so startled by the sudden downfall that I sprang up almost with a scream. Just as Tom might come in, came in Lord Westbrook now, with no unbuttoned ulster hanging about him, and no long and hurried stride. I could but dimly see his face in the dusk of the room, but I was too bewildered to think to tell Sarah to bring lights until she had shut the door upon him and returned to the kitchen.

"You did not hear me come," he said, in a tone of apology. "Your servant was speaking to some one at the front door, and I had no need to ring. I startled you a little."

- "Yes," I replied nervously, laying my hand in his, "I think I was in a mood for seeing ghosts. The dusk of a day like this is eerie, somehow. My father is not in, Lord Westbrook, if you want to see him."
- "No, I know he isn't; I met him on the read just now."
 - "And mother is gone to the rectory."
- "I know she is," said he coolly. "Your father told me he was on his way to fetch her home."
- "Oh, then they will not be long. If you will ring, Lord Westbrook, I will have some lights brought." He did not ring, but took up the poker and stirred the coals into a blaze. "Don't you like the firelight best, at this hour?" he asked, still on one knee on the hearthrug, with the poker in his hand. He was so much a familiar

friend of the family that it was no liberty he took. "There is enough of it now," he continued, smiling, "to keep off ghosts. It only wanted stirring up. What were you doing, to neglect that favourite occupation of yours?"

- "Nothing-thinking."
- "What of? Not of me, I know, or you would not have looked so scared at the sight of me just now."
- "No; not of you. I was thinking of old times—of Australia. I was there, you know, this time last year."
- "Yes," he said, musingly, "I suppose you were. That was before I knew of your existence. Fancy my living to be eight-and-thirty before I ever heard that you were born!"
- "If daddy had not fallen upon good times, and been lucky, you probably never

would have heard of it," I rejoined laughing, "and much that would have mattered!"

- "Very much indeed, I do assure you."
- "No, no; it would have been all the same to you, Lord Westbrook. But, oh, how different it would have been for me!" I exclaimed under my breath, involuntarily clasping my hands together. He drew a little chair close to the fire, nearly opposite mine, and, sitting down with his arms on his outspread knees, regarded me stead-fastly for a few seconds in silence.

"I should like to know what you mean by that," he said, presently, with a grave earnestness in his far-searching eyes. "You are not thinking what you say when you tell me it would have been all the same to me whether you had come to England or not. You know it would not have been the same." The rebuke was just; I had said that without thinking. Of course, I was not so dense an idiot as to be unaware of the difference my coming had made in his life, though I had tried not to learn more wisdom than I could help. I flamed a vivid rose-colour that even firelight had to acknowledge, and I rushed headlong to the refuge of vague explanations.

"What I meant was that your ways and habits would not have been altered, as mine have been," I stammered hurriedly. "You have always had so many lives, so to speak—a great nobleman in London, and a Bohemian amongst the studios, and an adventurer in wild countries, and a sportsman on the moors and in Norway—all those changes would have come to you naturally, just the same as they have always done. But I—I had only one life until

this time last year, and the one I have now is no more like that than this cold night is like the summer morning that is shining in Australia at this moment."

"Don't put it like that!" he exclaimed, almost sharply. "Your experiences in England have not been so unhappy, have they, that you can only compare them with those of your early life under that dismal figure?"

"No—oh, no, of course not. I have been very happy in England. But it is not the sort of happiness I had at home."

"At home," he echoed sadly. "Do you still think of Australia as home? I did not know you were so attached to the colony as that."

"I dare say I shall be as much attached to England by-and-by," I said, trying to laugh off the sentimentalism that was laying hold of us; "only it will take time, of course."

"I hope so, I trust so," he said earnestly.

And then I rose and went to look out of the window, to see if mother were coming. Not seeing her—not being able to see anything, in fact, for the thick darkness—I began to put some more coals on the fire, but of course had the scoop taken out of my hand. Then again I found myself sitting on my low chair, and my companion sitting on his, a little nearer to me than he was before, and an embarrassing silence between us.

- "Kitty," he said presently.
- "Yes?" I responded, with a great start, for he had never called me Kitty before.
- "Would you like to go to Australia again?"
 - "Certainly I should," I replied, smiling,

much relieved by the harmless nature of the question. "Indeed, I am going some day or other, though it may only be for a little while."

- "You don't want to live there always, then?"
- "No; I don't think there will be any question about that."
 - "Only you want to see it once again?"
- "Yes; that is what I look forward to."
- "Then," said he, putting out one hand and laying hold of mine that were clasped on my knee, "then let me take you, Kitty. You know what I want, my dearest. I have not said it in words, but, all the same, you know well what I want. Give me that, and I will give you—everything I have in this world to give. Marry me, Kitty, and I will take you to Australia for you. II.

your honeymoon—to the uttermost ends of the earth, if you wish to go."

I left my hands in his, and I looked into his kind, true face beseechingly, desperately, with tears running down my cheeks. "I knew you would say it some time, and that I could not stop you," I said, whimpering. "But, oh, Lord Westbrook, tell me, tell me, have I ever encouraged you by anything I have ever said or done? I was told once that I threw myself at your head because you were a lord. I know you have never thought that. But have I ever led you to think that I wanted to marry you?"

"Dear," he said, gently, "I think you have shown me that you liked me."

"Yes; so I do—so I do; better than any man I ever met, except my father and —one other. But if I tell you I can never marry you, will you think I have treated you badly?"

There was silence for a few seconds, while we looked solemnly and trustfully into one another's eyes; and then he said slowly, "No, love, no; you have always been above a suspicion of insincerity in my thoughts of you, and always will be. But, Kitty, Kitty, are you going to say that you can never marry me?"

"Yes," I cried, now sobbing outright.
"I would if I could, but I cannot, because of Tom. I ought to have told you before, but I didn't know how, that I was engaged to Tom."

"Who is Tom?" he asked—no in such a tone of anguish as I might have expected. In fact, for the second time in his life, he misunderstood me for a moment; for he thought (not unnaturally) I was crying

because an early entanglement prevented me from following the dictates of my heart. "Who is Tom? Sit here, dear," drawing me closer to him by the hand he still held, "and tell me all about it."

And I did as he bade me. I told him all about it, with the frankness and sincerity that he had come to look for in all my dealings with him. I told him the whole story, from the time of our early up-bringing together to the time when I sat alone to think of him on his birthday not. He understood me before an hour ago. I had done; and, in the deep silence that followed the conclusion of my narrative, his tears had become almost as hard to control as mine. I had no shame in sitting beside him in the twilight hand in hand, and in feeling so sorry and pitiful for him. that I could have kissed his hand to comfort him.

- "Kitty," he said presently, "it might be—it might by a bare possibility happen—that Tom will not be as faithful to you as you are to him."
- "I have no more doubt of him than of myself," I replied promptly, in a tone that I hoped had no ring of triumph in it.
- "But you are not infallible, my darling; you have not the gift of prophecy above other mortals, and you are not deeply experienced in the ways of the world as yet."
- "I trust him with all my heart," I replied confidently.
- "Yes, dear, that is your nature. And he is worthy of your trust, I have no doubt, or I think you would have known it —young as you are. But supposing, Kitty. —if there had never been any Tom at all,

would you, could you, then have married me?"

- "Yes," I answered frankly. "Well, now," he went on, after a pause, still holding my hand tightly locked in his, "let me propose a bargain. If Tom turns up on his next birthday, as he promised——"
- "And as he certainly will," I broke in, smiling through my tears.
- "Well, if he does, he gets you, of course, as he deserves. But if he fails you, Kitty—supposing such a thing possible, for the sake of argument, you know—then will you let me have a chance?"
- "I will," I said, "if you can think his cast-off leavings worth having. For I warn you that I should never love anybody again—no, not even you—as I love him. But oh, dear Lord Westbrook, don't think of such a thing, and distress yourself for

nothing. As certain as I am sitting here with you to-day, I shall be sitting with him this day next year."

"That is a cruel way of putting it," he said. "But I understand your perfect trust, and I hope—I ought to hope, at least—that he will justify it. I wish it were my task instead."

At this point we heard the click of the iron latch in the garden-gate, and we both rose hastily, though I don't know what for. "It is a bargain, Kitty?" he repeated eagerly, at last with reluctance letting go my hand.

- "There is no bargain," I answered, "when everything is on one side."
 - "But I want you to do something."
 - "What can I do?"
- "Do not write or communicate with him until the year is up."

"Oh, I am certain not to do that. I have never written to him yet, and don't mean to, for the sake of our promise to mother."

"But I mean, whatever happens. Things might turn up, Kitty—a year is a long time; promise me to trust to his own faithfulness——"

"Certainly," I broke in; for mother's foot was on the doorstep. "I will promise to leave it all to him—yes, whatever happens. I will give him no encouragement to be faithful; he will not need that."

A little later, I was sitting by the fire in my own attic room, in my dressing-gown, brushing my hair, and crying gently to myself; and I heard mother's dress rusting through the two empty chambers without. If she saw my tears, as I have no doubt she did, she did not appear to notice them, as she came softly in and sat down beside me, while she unfastened her sealskin coat.

- "You are late to-night, mother," I remarked, by way of saying something. "Didn't you find it dreadfully cold? It is going to snow, I think."
- "I think it is, by the feel of the air. How is your throat now, dear?"
- "I believe it is much the same; I have not thought of it, to tell the truth."
- "You have had something else to think of," said she, smiling, and drawing me to her. "I know Lord Westbrook has been to see you, and I think I know his errand. Don't I, Kitty?"
- "Perhaps so, mother. If he told you about it, I suppose he told you it was quite fruitless."
 - " I hope not, love—I hope not! Your

father and I have both foreseen it, and hoped it would not be that. We could not wish you a better lot than to be the wife of such a man, so good a man and so perfect a gentleman, and—with everything else into the bargain. Out of all the world we could not have seen or desired a better match for you. And he is almost like a son to us already. You must not be in a hurry about it, Kitty; it is too important a thing to be settled off-hand."

"I have not been at all in a hurry," I replied, hardened against her for the moment, as she thus ignored Tom's existence and all his claims, and steeling my heart against its mood for tender confidences.

"But you seem to have given him a sort of refusal?"

"Yes, mother, but I did not do it in a

hurry. It was settled before ever I saw him, if you come to that. I have told him just how everything is, and he quite understands. He is not angry, I assure you. It will not make any difference in our relations with him or his family. I think he is one of the kindest and best men in the whole world," I concluded, making a furtive dab with my handkerchief at my wet eyes, as I thought of him trudging home through the wintry darkness, with his sore disappointment for company.

"If you think that," said mother incautiously, "you should not cast him off so lightly—at any rate, not until you have had time——"

But I interrupted her almost fiercely.

"Lightly, mother! I should have been 'light' if I had taken him, after what has happened. Lightly!—that is the last word

to use! I may be young, but I have not shown myself 'light' in those things. I shall prove to you some day, mother, that that is a very unjust accusation."

A cloud of perplexity and trouble came over her face, and she rose with a sigh and kissed me. "I beg your pardon, dear, for speaking hastily," she said, with her soft dignity. "We won't talk any more of it now. You must believe that we only want to make you happy, and I hope you will be guided by our advice and experience a little. Now put on your dress; it is almost dinner-time."

When she was gone I put on my dress—my homely every-day evening dress, which happened just now to be the dear old Narraporwidgee black silk, with its gloss and beauty dimmed. But over that I put on my beautiful necklace, the first time I

had worn it when we had had no company, and when I came to dinner thus adorned, both father and mother stared at me.

- "You should be more careful of those emeralds, dear," remarked mother. "They are only suitable to wear on great occasions."
- "I wear them because it is a great occasion," was my proud reply. "It is Tom's birthday, mother."
- "Indeed," she said gently. "We must remember to drink his health."
- "To be sure we must; we'll have a bottle of the green seal up on purpose," quoth daddy, with a transparent affectation of cordiality. They could neither of them pretend to feel any enthusiasm about it.

CHAPTER VII.

"WHATEVER HAPPENS."

I HAD said to Lord Westbrook that I would not write or communicate with Tom until a year was up, whatever happened; and I felt that it was, under all the circumstances, a particularly binding promise. But two things happened in the earlier part of the year which caused me to repent my rash words most heartily.

We went to London in March, and took up our abode in a small furnished house in Park Lane for a short but brilliant season—much to dear Eleanor's distress;

for it was Lent, of course. I was presented at Court, in the utmost glory of Madame Elise's handiwork and a necklace of bead pearls almost as large as those round the pretty throat of Henrietta Maria in Vandyke's famous picture, and my début was so remarkable a success that mother thought it wise for a little while to hide the newspapers surreptitiously. Of course I found them, and of course I read all they had to say of me until I could repeat every paragraph by heart. I saw myself described as the "Australian beauty and heiress" ("Heiress be"-I won't say what —father rashly exclaimed, in hearing of mother's shocked and astonished ears; for he strongly disapproved of my being at large in London society with that reputation); and I repeatedly discovered myself to be "a star of the first magnitude."

golden hair, my graceful carriage, my unmistakable air of good breeding, "not-withstanding the well-known fact that the young lady's entire life has been spent in a remote and primitive colony"—down to the size of my pearls and the rich simplicity of my dress—all the details of my personal appearance on the day of the great drawing-room were set forth as freely as if I had been a public character of some sort. I certainly had not known that I was so remarkable a person, though not without my share of vanity; but I must confess that I thought no small things of myself after this.

A rush of parties and gaieties of every kind set in for us, of course; gaieties that were all, more or less, of a stately and noble order. Mother sailed through them serenely in her velvets and her old point, as if she had breathed no other atmosphere all her life long; and even dear daddy, in a bluff and country-squire style, bore himself with dignity, as a thorough old gentleman should. He must often have longed for his pipe and his newspaper, and his own Brookleigh fireside, but he took care not to show it. He beamed upon me from doorways and corners, as I whirled through midnight waltzes; he snoozed peacefully at the opera, when it was his time for sleeping in his own comfortable bed; and he dangled about at flower shows and exhibitions and garden parties and kettle-drums; and he never betrayed to either mother or me that the task was wearisome to him. "As long as the child was happy, he was," he used to say; and what he meant by that was that as long as the child was admired and

courted, he was so proud that he didn't know how to contain himself, and wanted nothing more. As for me, I was made so much of that my head was almost turned. I had several offers of marriage, incipient and declared; some from men I had not spoken to half a dozen times; one from an old gartered nobleman, whose place in the great world was much higher than Lord Westbrook's; one from my cousin Regy, half a one from Captain Damer, and two or three from a persistent and impertinent young dandy with a black moustache (which is a thing I never could bear), who sent me magnificent bouquets almost daily, though Regy said he hadn't a sixpence to bless himself with.

"They all run after you because you are an heiress," said that polite young man (Regy), when he found that these other

men, particularly the man with the black moustache, got too much in his way (I need not remark that I gave him his congé without a qualm of compunction, when the time came).

And, through all, I never lost sight of Lord Westbrook; and, I may add, I never wished to. He was too delicately chivalrous to compromise me by any pronounced attentions, but he was always at hand if I happened to want him, and always seemed to be keeping a silent watch upon me. We were often together at his mother's house; and he used to take us to the studios and to private exhibitions, and claimed the privileges of an old family friend in sundry other ways. As I had foretold to mother, she saw no difference in that respect in consequence of what had taken place between us. But it must

have gratified her very much to see, also (as her sharp eyes could not help seeing), that on crowded staircases and in crushed assemblies I always began by looking about for him, eager to know whether he had come, or whether he was coming; and that I seldom passed the night without a dance, or a chat in a corner, with him. The fact was, I looked on him as my one familiar and trusted friend in the midst of many enemies (for, though I liked admiration, I did not like being proposed to). And it was not natural that she should quite appreciate that sentiment, quick-witted as she was, particularly considering our present relations to one another.

Indeed, mother had schemes; and she flattered herself, poor dear, that they were immensely deep and perfectly successful.

I have no doubt that she yielded to Lady Westbrook's persuasions concerning my presentation (for she had no ambition that way for herself), solely and simply that I might have the highest social advantage that my birth and position warranted; but I am sure that she gave me that gay season afterwards with an idea that (even if it were a trifle unwholesome, as I know was her secret opinion) it would be efficacious in curing me of any little weakness that I migyt still have for Tom. Doubtless she felt that her wisdom was justified when she saw how heartily I enjoyed myself, how wildly energetic I was in taking advantage of every possible invitation, and how complacently and kindly I accepted the attentions Lord Westbrook offered me, notwithstanding the deluge of attentions that I daily and nightly received

from all sides. I do not for a moment reproach her—Heaven forbid that I should be so basely ungrateful! She did not comprehend what Tom and I were to one another; and she only schemed to put me in a lofty place because he who would have endowed me with so much worldly pomp and circumstance would have given me also the better blessing of a good man's love and care.

After a while, when her own ends (as she thought) were served, and I appeared to be having more dissipation than was good for me, she suddenly made up her mind to go back to Brookleigh. The season proper was not nearly over; we were bewildered with invitations and engagements; Lady Westbrook was not thinking of leaving town for a month. But mother put off her velvets and jewels,

requested daddy to make arrangements for giving up the Park Lane house, and declared that a little gaiety was all very well, but that she could not have me spoiled. So, in the quite early summer, I found my brief carnival over, and myself back with Eleanor, driving about the village and the green lanes in the pony carriage again, and seeking recreation at the mother's meetings and the crèche.

But it was while we were still in London that the first of those events occurred which caused me to repent so heartily the promise I had made to Lord Westbrook not to communicate with Tom, "whatever happened," until the year was up. I went one morning to see aunt Alice and my cousins, and stayed to lunch. I did not meet them often in the society we now frequented, though Regy made his appear-

ance there; and for that reason we were very particular not to appear to slight Since my presentation, and the public verdict thereupon, had astonished their weak minds, Bertha and Bella had been effusively affectionate, and never made the slightest allusion to the events which had ruptured our never very strong friendship the year before. On this occasion I was made welcome in the usual manner, and eagerly questioned as to my latest parties, and what I wore, and saw worn, at them-what I knew of the marriages and scandals going on in the great world, and so on. These topics being of such vast and absorbing interest that I could not get done with them until late in the afternoon.

I drove home quietly by myself; it was what daddy called an off-day, for-

tunately, when we had nothing to do but to fulfil the expectations of certain friends by appearing in our box at the opera at night, and, as I got out of the little brougham at the hall door, I saw the postman making one of those numerous daily deliveries that were so distinctly English in my eyes. I held out my hand as he paused at our door, and, to my delight, received a bundle of Australian papers, just arrived by the mail. I carried them in to daddy in triumph. He was sitting in a small back room, in a soft armchair, toasting his slippered feet, and nodding over the Times. This was all that he wanted to make him completely happy and comfortable. One Australasian was more to him than fifty English papers as yet, and I had brought him four.

"There," said I, spreading them out

in a row before him. "There's a feast for you. Don't eat them up all at once. If you'll wait half a minute while I get my bonnet cff. I'll come and sew them, and cut the leaves for you, and you can work through them leisurely and systematically. If you are a very good boy, we will let you off going to the opera to-night, perhaps. Lord Westbrook is to call after dinner, and we can make shift with him for once."

Whereupon I kissed him and ran upstairs, where I discarded my outdoor wrappings hurriedly, and disposed of them in my usual tidy manner. By the time I returned, armed with needle and thread, thimble and paper-knife, I found that his patience was exhausted, and he was

y cutting the leaves of one by the help of a rather limp envelope. I was beginning to scold him for this unseemly haste, when he startled me by uttering Captain Damer's favourite ejaculation, "By Jove!" in a very awestruck tone.

"What, daddy, what?" I cried sharply, as I saw his eyes fixed on the page near the end of the paper which was always devoted to the announcements of births, marriages, and deaths. For the first time the terrible thought that Tom might die before the "year was up," flashed across me. I ran up to him, and leaned over his shoulder, and he silently pointed with his finger to the name of Smith in the list of deaths.

"Read it," I whispered faintly; "I can't see. I have a mist over my eyes."

"It is the dear old lady," he replied, putting an arm round my waist. "She's gone, Kitty. 'On the 5th instant, at Booloomooloo Station, Barbara, the beloved wife of Thomas Ferrars Smith, aged 65.' Poor old Smith! What will he do? Poor old fellow, how will he ever get on without her? He was just nothing but her shadow, Kitty. You rememer how devoted he was to her?—like a young lover, for all the world."

"Oh, poor Tom!" I broke out, beginning to tremble and to weep bitterly. "Daddy, daddy, you don't think of Tom, in that lonely place, without any mother!"

"The poor lad—yes, I think of him too," replied my father, drawing me down on his knee, and wiping my eyes tenderly with his own tobacco-scented handkerchief. "He will miss us now from Narraporwidgee, I'll be bound. Mother would have known how to comfort him as no

one else could in such a sore trouble, poor boy!"

"And I, daddy—and I! Oh, if I could only be there to comfort him!"

"Yes, my woman," he said, soothingly, dropping his voice to a confidential whisper, "you shall write to him next mail, Kitty; I don't suppose mother will mind, considering. We'll all do what we can to comfort him."

I kissed the darling grey head in passionate gratitude for that kind thought; and then, mother coming in to hear the news, I stole upstairs and flung myself on my bed, where I lamented my dead friend and my desolate lover in floods of tears.

We met at dinner at seven o'clock, a very sad and silent little party. Mother's eyes were red as well as mine and we both wore black dresses, though we had not consulted each other as to such an observance of the occasion.

- "Of course you won't go to the opera to-night?" I remarked, as dessert was placed on the table.
- "Oh, my dear, of course not!" she replied, gently indignant at the idea of such a thing.
- "Lord Westbrook will be coming in directly," I went on. "May I see him when he comes?"
- "If you like, dear, certainly. You can explain to him that we have lost an old friend."

So, when Lord Westbrook came, with his vigorous rat-tat at the door, and a sweet little bouquet for me in his hand, I went to him alone in the drawing-room, and told him, with many tears and sobs, what sad news we had had from Australia.

"I am so sorry, Kitty," he said, in a voice that was really grieved. "It is Tom's mother, is it not—the lady who gave you your emerald cross?"

"Yes, the dearest, grandest, loveliest, old woman! And she said her only wish was to live for two years, to see—you know what."

"Yes," he said, with a little inward sigh. "I am very sorry, Kitty. You seem to have loved her very much."

"I did. I did, indeed. And Tom loved her so dearly. What will he do now she has gone? I don't know, in that lonely life of his! Lord Westbrook, daddy told me, when we heard of it, that I might write to him next mail, if I liked, to offer him a little sympathy and comfort—

only that, because we have known one another since we were children—nothing more——"

There was a dead silence for a minute or two, and I was afraid to lift my eyes to his face.

"You don't wish me to write to him?"
I blurted out, half timid, half angry, as
I drew the hand he had taken from his
grasp.

"I wish you to do what you think best," he replied, with gentle courtesy, which sounded very cold.

"You are thinking of your bargain," I exclaimed, flushing. "Well, I promised, I suppose, and I will not break my word without permission. I will not write to him. He will think I am hard-hearted, and he will be disappointed and hurt, but—no, I will not write.

He will believe in me all the same, I hope."

"Don't let anything I have said interfere with your wishes, dear Kitty. I would not for the world put any restraint on your inclinations," he began.

But I reiterated passionately that I would not write—that he should never think I had offered Tom even that small inducement to keep his pledge with me; and then I dashed out of the room in a tempest of sobs, feeling less friendly towards Lord Westbrook than I ever did before or since.

And I kept my word. When mail time came round, father wrote to old Mr. Smith, and mother wrote to Tom; and all I did was to commission the latter to say, in speaking of our share of the bereavement, that we all felt alike that we had lost a

VOL. II.

29

178 IN TWO YEARS' TIME.

friend who would never be replaced in our affections.

But because I could do no more I was very, very miserable.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA.

This was the first time that strong temptation came to me to break my promise to Lord Westbrook. On the second occasion my sense of honour and duty was even more cruelly tested. The Australian mail was responsible for this trouble as well as the other.

It arrived in Brookleigh one Friday morning at the usual hour (ten o'clock), after we had had our breakfast, and while I was amusing the little girls in the garden before their return home to their lessons with Miss Müller. (They had come out for an early walk with their nurse before the heat of the day began.) As they had the family passion for pictures, I had brought out a new volume of the Sunday Magazine to show themintended for a present to a little crippled protégé in the village—and I was bidden by Sissy, the eldest, to "read about" a touching picture of a barefooted, bareheaded "tinker woman" nursing a baby by the roadside; and a still more touching picture, on the opposite page, of a ragged and mop-headed "tinker child" gathering wild flowers on its bare knees. I accordingly began what promised to be one of those harrowing stories of child-hardship that are somehow considered so charming, always seem to me cold-blooded and never fail to make me

angry; and the beginning was very fresh and pleasant. I did not get far on in my tale, however—not far enough to discover that the tinker children were not to be killed by starvation or ill-usage for the sake of moving the sentimental reader to tears—when I came upon this passage:

—"They [tinkers] are clannish—that is, they hold together, and sometimes have a certain respect for family ties; but, on the whole, they are as uncivilized as Red Indians or Australian bushmen."

I shut up the book with a bang, and looked at the three little upturned faces at my knee. "Red Indians, indeed!" I exclaimed indignantly. "Good gracious me—what next, I wonder? These English people talk of what they know nothing about, Sissy. Red Indians! I wonder how Jones would like to be compared to

a Red Indian; and he's rougher and wilder than any Australian bushman that I ever saw." I whipped out a pencil, compressed my lips, scored deep lines over the offensive sentence, and with elaborate distinctness wrote on the margin, for the benefit of my cripple, "This is only ignorance—the author knows no better;" which struck me as a very weak protest when it was made.

The children, leaning over me, read the legend solemnly, word by word, as it was inscribed, and then asked, "Why don't people know more about Australia, cousin Kitty?"

"Because they are great donkeys," I replied wrathfully. "I have no patience with them."

And while they were still staring at me with three pairs of questioning eyes (feeling, probably, that I had not quite cleared up the difficulty) the postman came in at the gate—a dawdling old village postman, in grey coat and cordurous.

"You might as well call him a Red Indian!" I exclaimed. "At any rate, he'd find his civilization wanted some considerable additions if he tried to make a living in the bush." It was astonishing how very sore this unconscious little joke made me.

When my indignation had spent itself I began to tell them about the "real Australia," as they called it—watching the old postman depart without any curiosity as to what he had brought us. These children were never tired of hearing of Narraporwidgee, and I was never tired of describing it to them, and the child-life I had led there. It stood in the place

of games, that interminable narrative; and when, on rare occasions, I mimicked the laughing jackass for them, and the sound of the mopoke and curlew at night, and particularly the peculiar bagpipy warbling, so subdued and monotonous, of the sitting magpie or her mate (I never could find out which) in the moonlight of the early mornings in spring, they experienced all the rapture of play that noisier children would have found in blind-man's buff.

I was just telling them—what they always wanted to know first as a preliminary to all conversation on this subject—"what time it was in Australia now," describing the clear fresh winter night, the ghostly Booloomooloo hills, the full-fed little river, overflowing the paddocks and shining in sheets under the bright moon, within view of the verandah outside my

bedroom door, when the nurse came round a corner from her gossip with Sarah, who was her dear friend, to say that it was time for her little charges to go home; and "Mrs. Chamberlayne wished me to tell you, miss, that the Australian letters is come."

I flew into the house as soon as I had kissed the children and packed them off, and found mother in the little breakfast-room, in an armchair by the open window, with newspapers all round her, and an open letter in her hand. There was no black edge to that closely-written sheet. It was too soon for an answer from Tom.

"Such a budget, Kitty!" exclaimed mother brightly, pointing to more closely-written sheets in her lap. "From that good little Mrs. Barton. Bring your work and sit down, and I'll read it to you.

Do you know, they have got their bellturret at last, and the old tree is cut down."

- "Dear old tree! I am sorry for that."
- "Kitty, what nonsense! Quite time it was, I'm sure. And Mrs. Barton has another baby; and little Mary can run alone and talk a little. But I suppose she is two years old now."
- "A year and a half and five days," I said quickly.
- "You have a good memory," said mother; and then, seeing me settled on a stool near her, she began to read.

The first page of Mrs. Barton's letter was taken up with her babies and the general affairs of her own household. The second, third, and fourth detailed sundry parish grievances—how the prima donna of the choir had taken offence and left,

because it had been gently hinted to her on one occasion that she sang a little flat; how a wealthy and influential tradesman had disputed Mr. Barton's right to introduce "Hymns Ancient and Modern," and, finding the hymn-book adopted in the face of his protest, had taken himself off to the Presbyterians; and so on. The next sheet took a rather brighter tone; they had had a tea-meeting, which had realised nearly fifteen pounds; and a new manager had come to the Bank of Australasia, who belonged to the Church, and was a great acquisition generally. Moreover, "they" were going to build a new kitchen to the parsonage, and Mr. Smith had made her a present of a piano. Here we had a long account of the illness and death of Mrs. Smith, and of her burial in the garden at Booloomooloo, which mother read with cloudy eyes and trembling lips.

"She never took any active part in the parish," wrote Mrs. Barton, "beyond paying a larger subscription than anybody else; but she was very kind, in her proud way, and she will be a great loss. died very suddenly—almost before they could get a doctor to her. She came to the parsonage only three days before to see the piano fixed up, and she stayed some time chatting, and played 'O rest in the Lord' very sweetly. Mr. Tom was with her, and asked me privately if I didn't think her looking delicate; but I thought not more than usual. The next thing that we heard was that she was dead. Mr. Tom came in to fetch Charles, and he was dreadfully broken-down, though very brave and quiet." Mother paused

and blew her nose, and I covered my eyes with my hand. "You will be surprised to hear that she objected to be buried in the cemetery, and had chosen her own grave at Booloomooloo." "Oh no," added mother; "I always knew where she wished to be buried."

"So did I," I murmured with a sob.

"The funeral altogether was very strange,
Charles said, and it has made a great deal
of talk. She was dressed in an old wedding dress instead of a shroud, and there
were no mourners except her husband and
son, who carried the coffin to the grave
themselves, and there was no name on the
coffin. All kinds of stories are going
about. We have heard that old Mr. Smith
(who will not see Charles, or anybody)
is a little out of his mind with grief, and
that he keeps saying she was a princess,

and that her first husband was killed in a duel with someone who had paid her too much attention, and made him jealous. Some say it was Mr. Smith himself, and others that it was a lover of her youth, from whom she had been forcibly parted on the eve of a clandestine marriage—a soldier, who afterwards was killed in battle, and left her a large property."

"I thought Mrs. Barton was more sensible than to give an ear to such nonsense," interrupted mother, wiping her eyes angrily.

But I knew a little more than mother, and I had an idea that it was not so far beyond the bounds of probability. The story shaped itself in my mind like a dim landscape made clear by a flash of lightning. I remembered the lovely girl-face in the diamond locket. Such a face must

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have had many worshippers, even if it had belonged to a dairymaid; and it was hinted that she had been a princess, and I was quite ready to believe it. I was sure, at any rate, that she had not been English by birth, and that she had come of noble race. Doubtless that ivory miniature—which alone, of all her jewels, was not to be disturbed in its setting—had been done for that first love of hers, who had been to her what Tom was now to He had been poor, probably, and forbidden to approach her; and they had been unable to give one another up, and had planned a secret marriage. wondered if the old wedding-dress that she had been buried in was the dress she had prepared for that marriage, that true been frustrated at il the lives of both

for ever after; or whether it was gown in which she had espoused her second husband. I was quite sure she had not worn it when she wedded her first. He had been forced upon her, and perhaps he had been hard and cruel had known that she loved another man better than she did him, and punished her for it. And I thought how she might have found some comfort in a glimpse of her young soldier now and then, and how he would have kept watch upon her in her trouble, in the forlorn hope of being able to shield her from some of it; and then came, naturally, the jealous husband's discoveries, and insulting treatment of his rival—treatment which in those days could only be received on the point of the sword. And the duel had been fought, and the husband killed; and the lover, in despair

at his own deed, had gone away to the wars, and the desolate young widow had seen him no more—only heard by-and-by that he had died in battle, and left her a casket of diamonds, in which she had found her own little love-gift framed in the largest and purest as a halo for her beautiful face. For I had quite made up my mind that it was he who had left her the diamonds, "by special bequest." He had been poor when she would have married him, and her people would not let her; and then, when it was too late, he had come in for a great inheritance as all poor lovers should do, for a judgment on mercenary match-makers—and it had been of no value to him, since he could not share it with her. He had never had any heir of his own, of course; he had let his estates go, as they would to whoever was at law entitled to them; but he had bequeathed his personal property and jewels to the woman he loved, and then gone and got shot at the first convenient opportunity. As for Mr. Smith—his place in the story was clearly indicated. A plain, unobtrusive, faithful lover, of whom nobody had taken any notice in those gay and eventful times—who had come to her, when she was all wrecked, and wretched, and alone in the world, to be a sort of harbour of refuge for her broken heart. Afterwards, when I talked to Tom about it, I found that I was not very far out in my conjectures.

Mother went on with her letter, and very soon all thought of poor Mrs. Smith was driven out of my head. "They have heard of your presentation, Kitty," said she, smiling. "Listen to this—'We have

been much interested in the accounts of Miss Chamberlayne's début, which we have all read in the English papers at the Mechanics'. We do not wonder that she has made a sensation, for Charles always said——' What's the time, Kitty? I think I must speak to Mrs. Roberts about the dinner, and finish this long letter afterwards."

"No, you won't," I replied, laying hands on her forcibly to keep her down in her chair; "you'll just finish it first—there's only another page or two. Oh yes, I know what has suddenly made you wonder what the time is—Charles has been paying me a compliment, and you don't want me to know it. You needn't be afraid; he can't go further than saying I'm a star of the first magnitude, anyhow. If you won't read it to me, I'll read it for myself."

- "Saucy child! Well, 'Charles always said she was the prettiest young creature he had ever seen,'" read mother, blushing as if she herself had been the object of his admiration.
- "Oh, Charles!" I exclaimed, laughing; "and with such a pretty little wife, too. I expect she says that by way of doing the amiable to you, mother."
- "I expect so," assented she. And we each of us told a barefaced fib, and knew it.

Silence having fallen between us, during which I knitted all round the heel of a stocking, I looked up at mother and asked her to go on. I found her reading to herself with deep interest, and a grave, reserved face which set my heart suddenly beating with its ever-ready fears. "What is it?" I exclaimed hastily, dropping my work and stretching out my hands for

the letter. "Any bad news? Let me see!"

She held back the sheet for a moment, and then gave it to me and rose from her chair. "Perhaps you had better read it for yourself," she said, half-smiling and half-annoyed, "while I go and see about dinner." And she went out, closing the door softly after her. I immediately searched for Mr. Barton's pretty compliment, and then I read as follows:--" We are all very anxious to know what Lord Westbrook is like. One of the papers mentioned him as her future husband, and the Peerage has never been to be found in the Mechanics' since. People are always taking it away to find out all they can about the family and connections of the man who has won the flower of our district for his wife. I asked Mr. Tom, the day he was at the parsonage with his mother, whether he had ever met him in England, and he said he knew nothing about him. Tell Miss Chamberlayne that we all feel she has done great credit to the colony, and are proud of her elevation to a station which no one is better fitted to adorn."

When mother came back I was knitting quietly, and I left off to hand her the letter without a word—much to her relief, apparently. But I felt as if the last straw had been laid on my back, and a cold weight of lead upon my heart, and that I had no more courage left in me to fight through those six months that were yet stretching wearily out into the future between me and the consummation of my hopes. Oh, what would Tom think? Would he have enough faith in me to know that it was a lie? This was my second trouble—and the

greatest trouble, I can safely say, that I ever had in all my life. It was greater sometimes than I knew how to bear. Lord Westbrook was away; if he had been at home it would have been all the same—I could not have confided in, or appealed to, him. And I could not—I felt I must not—write to Tom, even to refute so black a calumny. It would be all the same as telling him that I was true to him, and thus binding him afresh to keep true to me. And yet I shuddered sometimes to think what it might cost us.

It worried me all the autumn and winter worse than an illness. It was an illness, to all intents and purposes. I could not rest when I went to bed for thinking of it, and then I felt languid in the daytime for want of sleep. I actually became nervous —I, who was always so bold—so that I

jumped if a door was shut suddenly, and broke out into profuse perspiration if I heard a noise in the silent house at night, though it were no louder than the report of a cracking seed-pod in a bush of Cape broom. I lost my fine appetite, and lost my bloom, and the vigour and firmness of my young limbs, and the equableness of my temper. Lord Westbrook, when he came home for the hunting, complained to mother of my evident deterioration in health; and mother proposed a change to a warmer climate, as she thought the English winter was too severe for me.

"Suppose we go to Rome after Christmas," I overheard her say to daddy one day. "The child is dull being so long in Brookleigh, and wants brightening up."

"With all my heart," replied daddy, "if you think the air will suit her."

"Not if I know it," I said to myself.

"I have not long to wait now, and I will not be out of the way when the time comes."

202

CHAPTER IX.

HOW WE MET AT LAST.

Whether I should have been forcibly carried off to Italy, for my good, or allowed to follow my own devices in my own way, I never had occasion to prove; for—of all things that could happen!—Bella Goodeve took it into her head to get engaged at Christmas, and to fix on Tom's birthday in February for her wedding. When I first heard of the latter arrangement, which was on the receipt of a pressing invitation to be her bridesmaid, and saw that mother had a

fixed intention to do all honour to the occasion, as a near connection of the family, I was frantic with consternation. I declared in the most solemn and vehement manner that a team of bullocks should not drag me as a bridesmaid in Bella's train, though I was puzzled to find sufficient reasons to give for so fierce a determination. It was unlucky, I had heard, to be a bridesmaid twice (and I had previously been an attesting witness at the marriage of a maid-servant at Narraporwidgee); and I could not think of wearing cream colour and cherry ribbons, even with the mitigations of a mob cap, and a muslin bib and apron, trimmed with real Valenciennes. Moreover, there were girls in Bella's circle whom I objected to associate with, because —oh, well, because one of them dropped all her h's, and another, I had heard, had worn Madame Rachel's enamel, and a third made herself conspicuous at public skating rinks. At all of which apparently fair arguments mother only turned up the nose of scorn.

"I shall not urge you to be bridesmaid against your wish," she said quietly, "though you will vex your aunt and Bella very much by a refusal, I am sure. But we must all go to the wedding, of course—there can be no question about that." Whereat I pleaded, then coaxed, then stormed, then cried; and, finding mother obdurate, began to consider whether, after all, there was not something to be said in favour of the arrangement. It was better than going to Rome, at any rate. I should be in a most get-at-able place—not more than a cab-drive from the deck of the ship or the Victoria station. And then Tom

had a slight acquaintance with the Goodeves; would probably hear of the marriage, and conclude that I should be there. The Australian mail (as I had long ago taken pains to find out) was due in London a week beforehand; and he would doubtless spend that week in making the discovery of my whereabouts, and in taking measures for insuring a meeting between us at the appointed time.

Mother was very much perplexed (and said so) by my fierce opposition to what she thought would be rather a pleasant break in the monotony of my village life; but she must have been far more puzzled by my sudden and cheerful acquiescence in all her wishes, though she did not acknowledge it to me. I should like to be a bridesmaid, I coolly assured her, though I had an insurmountable objection to wearing

red ribbons; and I should very much enjoy a little trip to London. At any rate, there would be a ball at night, at which I could wear what I liked; and it would be great fun to see Bella in all her glory. And then I asked her what she thought would be nice for a wedding present.

"You are an odd girl," was her reply, "I don't know what to make of you now-a-days."

She certainly did not know what to make of me all that month of January. I hardly knew what to make of myself. I had violent fits of hysterical excitement; moods of such profound dejection that they made me look old and haggard, and as if life was more than I could bear; and alternate moods of wild gaiety, when I became quite childish and silly. I knew that she watched me anxiously, with her

tender heart full of care and trouble; but I would not help her to find out what was the matter with me. The suspense that I suffered was simply torture, but I could not bear to betray it. As I said to myself repeatedly, if I only waited a little while it would soon be all over.

It was over at last, when we started from Brookleigh, with uncle Armytage, aunt Kate, Bertie, and Eleanor, the day before the wedding. The mail had come in, and I had seen the list of passengers in the latest Australasian, and no name of Smith was there. After weeping bitterly over this discovery (and the further discovery that my father had had no colonial letters), I had bethought myself that he might have come by a previous mail, or by an ordinary ship; and a diligent search had revealed a "T. Smith (as well as a "J.

F. Smith "and a "K. Smith") in the list of passengers for Brindisi given in an Australasian that we had received a month before. I went up to London fully satisfied that that "T. Smith" was my T. Smith, and that he had naturally taken the precaution to come early, in order to provide against possible delays from accidents or stress of weather at sea. From that time all my doubts and fears were at rest.

We found Bella in great glory indeed. She had distanced her elder sister, who had heretofore been considered in the Goodeve circle as the beauty, and the marriageable daughter of the family; and she had, in her father's words, "done remarkably well." Her lover was a trifle elderly, and he was stouter than we could wish; but he was one of the richest stockbrokers on the Exchange, and he was making such munifi-

cent provisions for his future wife that aunt Alice declared she would be the most enviable woman in England—in which I didn't agree with her. The house was full of guests—so full, indeed, that Eleanor and I were put into one little room together. The trousseau was tremendous; the presents overflowed table, sofas, floors, and even beds, chief amongst which shone the bridegroom's gift of jewels all alone on a gipsy table—a seat of opals and emeralds (but not like my emeralds, costly though they were) in nests of white satin, over which the bridesmaids hung in rapture. The bridesmaids themselves came in for some of this golden splendour. huge and solid lockets, each adorned with an I and an E (the bridegroom's name was Ebenezer) in rubies and pearls, the great red E swallowing up the pale I that interlaced it, were duly presented in twelve nice velvet cases; and Eleanor and I, at any rate, felt that our trinket boxes had received a substantial contribution.

"Am I not a lucky girl?" exclaimed Bella, at intervals of five minutes or so. Upon which innocent query a chorus of "You are indeed!" invariably followed. "I am only sorry for poor Bertha," she occasionally added (when Bertha did not happen to be by); "for she always expected to be married first. However," with an arch nod of her frizzy head, which was understood to express volumes, "I shall have her to stay with me."

There was an impromptu dance after dinner, in the room prepared for the grand ball next day, and I worked off a little of my superfluous excitement in the arms of my rejected lovers, Captain Damer and Regy, who were the best waltzing machines at hand. Then there was a little gossip and sentiment round Bella; then effusive and protracted good nights, repeated all over again on the staircase and landings; and then Eleanor and I retired to our joint bedroom, where neither of us had a wink of sleep all night. I could not contain myself any longer; I had to confide in somebody; and I told my little love-story -my little story that had no plot—to Eleanor, and it took the whole night to make her thoroughly understand it. Lord Westbrook, she would want to know "Who was Tom?" and could not be made to comprehend without endless explanations that he was, and always had been and always would be, the hero of the tale. Until nearly two o'clock in the morning she persisted in giving that place to Lord

Westbrook, over whose blighted affection, she shed a few gentle sisterly tears; but by the time the grey dawn stole in upon us, cold and raw, with a little sleet upon the window, she had become fully informed of the exact state of the case, and as convinced of my lover's worth and faithfulness (almost) as I was myself. The coming day to her, now, was much less Bella's wedding day than the day of my public betrothal. Blessings on her dear head! To see her poking it out into the chill air, before ever a brush had been put to it, in the idea that he might be found, like Mr. Guppy, watching the bricks that contained me from the silent street below, was to make my own assurance feel doubly sure.

That morning there were breakfasts going on in half a dozen bedrooms, including, of course, that of the fair bride; and there was a scrambling meal below. Nelly and I went to visit our cousin, who was throned in state in a pink dressing-gown, and took our coffee and bread and butter with her. I was in that mood that I felt I had never loved Bella enough.

- "Dear Kitty!" she exclaimed, as I gave her a bear's hug; "You will soon be in my position, I hope."
- "I hope so," I replied fervently, not in the least caring for the fact that she was mentally bracketing Lord Westbrook with Mr. Ebenezer Goldstein.
- "Only when your time comes, I hope you will have a brighter day than I have."
 - "You couldn't have a better day, Bella!"
- "I suppose it is as good as one can expect in the beginning of February. It is a horrid season for a wedding; one is sure to look either blue or yellow. But

what could I do? If I had put it off, we should have had Lent here; and nobody marries in Lent now-a-days. And waiting till Easter—I am quite sure dear Ebenezer never would have consented to that."

"The rain is clearing off and the sun is coming out," I said gaily, "and, oh, Bella, if you had hunted the calendar through you could not have hit upon a luckier day!"

"I don't know how about lucky," she rejoined, smiling. "I have always heard that it is unlucky for a bride to be rained on, and it hasn't left off yet."

Here five or six more bridesmaids came rushing in, and Eleanor and I retired to dress. This was a more satisfactory business than I had ventured to expect. Madame Elise had had the composing of our costumes, though not any choice as

to their colour; and therefore one could not easily look ill, even with a combination of red ribbons and golden hair. The mobcaps were coquettish and graceful, and so were the bibs and aprons. Eleanor looked a perfect picture in hers, with her brown hair and her demure little face; and my private verdict on my own appearance was, that it was "not so bad, considering." Indeed, after seeing two fat Miss Goldsteins, whose locks were of the ruddiest shade of carrots, I felt that my cherry bows were quite becoming.

Mother came in when we were nearly ready—regal herself in sapphire-coloured velvet, and, not only regal, but warm and comfortable, which was more than we should be by-and-by; and she found me in the act of fastening my emerald cross round my neck, in close juxtaposition with Mr. Goldstein's ruby locket.

- "My dear child!" she exclaimed, with a horrified emphasis on each separate word. "Well, I did think you had better taste, Kitty."
- "I must wear it to-day, mother," I replied, dogged and frightened, and clasping both hands tightly over it. "Oh please—I must."
- "But you mustn't indeed," she retorted, with brusque determination. "Anything so horribly vulgar I could not allow—I really could not, Kitty. If you don't know any better than to dress yourself in that style, my dear, you must be taught."
- "On such a great occasion," I began, falteringly, and then I looked at Eleanor in despair.
- "It is the very occasion of all others when it is impossible to wear it without

outraging all decent taste," mother went on, driven to speak strongly by the vehemence of her feelings. And then, seeing the tears in my eyes, she laid her hand on my shoulder. "I know how fond of it you are," she said, more gently; "but you must see—you surely cannot help seeing—that to wear it with that dress and in the morning, making yourself conspicuous amongst all the rest, is in the worst possible taste. Ask Eleanor what she thinks."

Eleanor did not speak, and I slowly unclasped the chain, and let the jewel fall into my hand, two big tears dropping after it.

"Put it away until to-night," said mother; "it will be quite suitable to wear then." And I mechanically locked it up in its little safe, while I cast about

- when shall I is I I asked of Eleanor, when sumt Alber had called my mother aver. "Tell me what I shall do?"
- Think think you can wear it to go to church in hear—I don't really," was her reluciant really.
- "But I might see him at church, and what then?"
- Fig. would know, of course, that you could not wear it, under the circumstances. Even if you had it on, he would not be likely to see it in such a crowd as there is sure to be."
- "He would—it was to be a sign between us. Oh. Eleanor, didn't I tell you? It was to prove to him that I had been true and faithful. I promised I would have n we met to-day, and have it on

Eleanor rubbed her forehead in such perplexity that she rubbed her mob-cap awry; and in the pause between us we heard the rustling of eight or ten creamcoloured dresses on the landing outside.

"Then I'll tell you what you must do," said she. "You must let me fetch aunt Mary back, and you must tell her all about it."

"I cannot—it is too late for that. And I dare not, Nelly! I dare not until Tom is here to back me up."

"Kitty! Eleanor! Aren't you dressed yet?" called Bertha's voice outside the door. "Some of the carriages are gone already, and Bella is now going to have her yeil on."

"All right," I responded, and, driven to decision, I hurriedly took out my cross again and fastened it round my neck.

"I'll tuck it inside out of sight," I said, "and I can pull it out when I like—yes, that is the way to manage—how stupid not to have thought of that before! Ah, Nelly, it's all very well for you to say he couldn't see it," I laughed, as the lambent glow and sparkle played over my hands. "It would take a deal of daylight to put that fire out."

As we set off to church, leaving Bella sitting on a chair in the hall, with her father standing over her, even her heart did not palpitate under her bridal satin and Brussels lace as mine under the cold touch of the treasure hidden in my breast —I am sure it did not. I felt that my very lips were grey, as I gazed from side to side out of the carriage windows, with an apprehensive longing that I could not express in words. I had a white Indian

shawl with me, in which I hugged myself, but the chattering of my teeth was audible to my companions.

"You should have done as I did, Miss Chamberlayne," said one of them. "I had a wadded lining made to my body and sleeves, and it keeps one as warm as possible."

"Miss Chamberlayne is not as thin as you are," laughed another, "and she would not like to spoil her figure."

And the third—which was Eleanor—whispered anxiously, "Have you got a pocket anywhere, Kitty? Put in my smelling-bottle, and—oh pray don't faint!"

A short drive landed us at the church, which, as Eleanor had predicted, was crowded inside and out. It was like the wedding of Miss Kilmansegg. As we stood in the porch, like a flock of goslings,

shaking out our skirts and waiting for the arrival of the bride, I peered eagerly this way and that, but I saw no sign of Tom. The crowd surrounded us like a wall, in spite of all the efforts of the vergers to keep the approach to the nave clear. I gave up looking until I had a better opportunity, and tried to gather my wits together.

"Here she comes! Here she comes!" shouted the gamins outside. "Keep back! Keep back!" shouted the vergers within, rushing to and fro with their gowns flapping behind them. And the bride's carriage drew up, with a great flourish; and uncle Goodeve descended heavily, and handed out his daughter.

We managed to form our procession somewhow, after a good deal of scuffling, and followed her up the long nave; Bertha and I being the first of the six couples, and having some difficulty to avoid treading on her tremendous train. Arrived in the chancel, we confronted a formidable array of clergymen - uncle Armytage, Bertie (now a curate in Yorkshire), the vicar of the parish, and the vicar's senior curate. We confronted, also, poor Mr. Goldstein, who was evidently extremely hot, in spite of the cold weather; and Mr. Goldstein's brother, who was best man. Also Lord Westbrook, with an untimely lily of the valley in his button-hole, looking pale and thoughtful, and meeting my eyes anxiously; Regy, Captain Damer, Lieutenant Wiggles, and two more of their brother officers, pulling their moustaches and regarding the city gentlemen in a lordly manner; and a crowd of ladies, in rich velvets and ermines, and feathers, and interv. amongst whom mother held up her head like a queen. These latter gathered round us, as we gathered round the central figure. The organ ceased, and uncle Armytage's sonorous voice rung over all cur heads, full and clear—"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in hely matrimony."

I waited a little while, awed, in spite of my preoccupation, by the solemnity of that marriage rite, which has a way of touching the nerves of the least interested spectator. I listened to the whole of the opening exhortation, and to the terrible charge to the husband and wife; and to the supreme question, framed in such touchingly simple and solemn words—to which neither of them responded, I thought, with so hearty an "I will" as I would utter when my time came. I even had a little attention to spare for that aimless inquiry, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" because poor uncle Goodeve, having no reply provided for him, shifted uneasily from one leg to the other, cleared his throat, and wriggled in a highly ludicrous manner. I stood just behind him, and could not help seeing it. But when the binding contract was made, and Bella sank on her knees by her newlymade husband, and a proportion of the company (for they also appeared to be in some uncertainty as to what they ought to do) followed her example by twos and threes, I (left for a moment standing comparatively alone) took one swift glance over so much of the church as lay within the compass of my vision without turning my head round, and then—and then—I saw Tom.

Yes, there he was, not half a dozen yards away, leaning over the front of a pew, and waiting for my recognition. Tall, and big, and strong, and noble, with those frank, straightforward, fearless eyes, and those wide, level, white brows, and that big and beautiful tawny moustachebigger now than it was two years agothere was no mistaking him for anybody else. I half held out my hands to him in wild joy of welcome, regardless of all appearances, and then I tore away the upper fastenings of my dress, and dragged out the emerald cross. I was standing in the first pale ray of sunshine that we had had that day, and the jewels flickered in my own upturned eyes as I turned them

outwards towards him. He saw, nodded, smiled—if you can call such a look as that a smile—and then, as Eleanor's warning hand touched my arm, I fell on my knees and covered my face, and began to sob and whimper under my breath, and to feel that I should have all I could do to keep from going into hysterics, or making a scene of some sort. I don't know what I should have done if Eleanor, who had been watching me from the time I got down from the carriage out of the corner of her eye, had not understood at once what had happened and come to my relief. She displaced Bertha gently, and took her stand beside me, so as to protect me from the gaze of the bystanders, two or three of whom had begun to feel curious as to the cause of my strange behaviour. "Keep up, Kitty," she whispered imploringly, finding the

miligaria mi paing i in my mal o'Tr dirt wan employ to day miligariah yang dim'

I vis a sessible line and lid more
to be then the antiling-locals. "Tes"
I visquesid hale with accounting que:
too I vill leng up."

Then me organ broke our again, and not writte shared rang with the beautiful willing realist. Theseel are all they that the life is become in the His ways. It was like a beneallemen in our recinion. It into see I am any more until we were sorth making our way hown the still serviced more after the signing in the vessely was over; and then I was following by and has Goldstein on the arm of my count he send waiting for me to pass him—sand towering rearly the height of his

noble head above the crowd around him, looking back at me up the church with his loving, longing, welcoming eyes. When I had nearly reached him we simultaneously put out our hands, which were locked in a clasp that made mine, at least, tingle for an hour afterwards.

- "Is it all right?" he whispered, with a sort of choking intensity that made each word a struggle, bending his tall head until his moustache almost brushed my ear.
- "O yes, yes, yes!" I answered in an eager undertone. And then we were parted again by the crowd.

But Regy had seen the meeting and recognized his old acquaintance. "What—hullo!" he exclaimed under his breath, starting back. "Why, who would have thought of seeing you here, of all people in the world!"

- "Kitty inew I should be here," answered Tom, smiling, as he held out his hand SURE.
- *I'll sie, iv Jive! Well she knows how to keep a ming dark, at any rate. I say-where are you hanging out?"

Tom reviled by another question. "Are you at your old die still?"

- "Yes" said Regy.
- *Well can you meet me there this afternoon? I won't keep you ten minures."
- "All right-four eldeck," said my cousin over his shoulder, as the crowd behind us here us towards the door.

CHAPTER X.

"THEY ARE OVER NOW."

"I SAY, Kitty, what does this mean?" inquired Regy, when, having reached home again, we found ourselves standing in a corner of the hall, on the outskirts of a crowd of company.

"You'll know soon. He will tell you this afternoon, I dare say," I replied, brimming over with smiles.

"Well, you can keep a thing dark!" he repeated, in a sort of solemn wonder. "I didn't think you had it in you, Kitty. I remember thinking there was something

in the first night I ever saw you when you were so savage because I resert you about him; but that's why, that is two years ago almost! And you've been as mum as the Sphinx ever since, so that I declare I had forgotten his very existence until I saw you speaking to him in church just now."

"It isn't just one of those things that one wants to talk acout," I said, demurely. "And Regy—Regy, dear—you won't mind my asking you not to tell anybody you saw him to-day until I give you leave or he does? Mother did not see him, nor father either—I'm sure I don't know how they managed not to, for he seems taller than ever. I want to keep it 'dark,' as you call it, just a few hours longer—only a few hours."

"All right. And you won't mind my

asking you something—just to satisfy my mind?"

"Whatever you please," I replied, flaming to the colour of the ribbons in my cap.

"I suppose he is the one, Kitty?"

"Yes, Regy—I may as well say it, for everybody will know it soon. Yes, he is the one—he has always been the one."

"Well, you do know how to keep a thing dark!" he muttered once more, as he heaved a deep sigh over his own now vanished hopes.

We all sat down to the wedding breakfast; and, what with speeches and ceremonies of one sort or another, we did not rise from the table until three o'clock. Then Bella had to be dressed, kissed, cried over, and congratulated afresh; and all the final tearful leave-takings had to be

IN TWO YEARS' TIME.

through; and it was nearly four the carriage, with its white horses red-jacketed postillions, carried off the ppy couple" to the Charing Cross ion, followed by the customary shower old shoes.

'When I am married," I said to Eleanor,
I peered from the hall door, "you won't
tch me going touring in purple velvet
and silver-fox, and bran-new boots and
noes, so that all the waiters and porters
and people know what has happened as
well as I do myself. I shall put on an old
serge, and an ulster perhaps; or, if it is
summer, a linen that has been to the wash
—Oh, Lord Westbrook, forgive me!" I
broke off suddenly, seeing him standing
beside me with a look on his sad, brave
face that made my happy heart contract in
a spasm of pain and shame.

Eleanor slipped away, and he came upand held out his hand. "Good-bye forthe present," he said. "Keep one waltz for me to-night, won't you?"

"As many as you like," I began eagerly; and then I checked myself. "As many as I can spare," I added, colouring.

"I know," he said, with a smile on his mouth, but none in his dear, kind eyes. "I think I saw him in church, didn't I? He is a fine fellow, Kitty, and—he's a lucky one!" With which he put on his hat and ran down the steps into the street.

Then up came Regy, also equipped for a walk.

"Well, Kitty, I'm off," said he. "I think I'm about the best-natured fellow going, to be made a cat's-paw of in this. way."

"So you are, dear Regy—so you are,"

I responded, laying my hand on his arm.

"Oh, yes, I dare say!" he grumbled. And then he went off.

After that the house had an interval of rest. We ladies retired to our bedrooms, and refreshed ourselves with tea and dressing-gowns in congenial groups. Mother was taken up with the task of comforting poor aunt Alice for the loss of her child; and Eleanor and I slipped away together to talk over our great secret, and hoped that in such a crowd of company we should not be missed.

Towards dusk one of the maids came and tapped at our door, and asked to speak to me. "Mr. Reginald, miss, is in the little study," she said, "and particularly wants to see you for a few minutes."

I flung on a dress and dashed down-

stairs, and found Regy in the study (a little room off the dining-room, used for writing business letters in), which was deserted now, and almost dark.

"Well, Kitty," said he, coming to meet me, with a little brown package in his hand; "I've seen your young man and asked him to come to the ball to-night. I shall just tell my mother I'm bringing another friend. She'll be delighted; for she finds it hard work to get men enough for such a lot of girls."

"Thank you, dear Regy," I replied (I did try not to keep saying "dear" Regy, but somehow I couldn't help it).

"Oh, it is no doing of mine. He'd have found a way to come anyhow. And, Kitty, I was to give you this. It is something very precious, I suppose, for he was awfully particular about it. I was on no account to let it out of my hands until I gave it into yours. So—there, take it. I suppose it's a present the brute has brought you from Australia. Do you know he has been over a month in London?"

- "I know he has," I replied, taking the parcel, which felt square and hard, like a box, into my arms.
- "You know he has! Well, I didn't think you had it in you to be so close, Kitty—'pon my word, I didn't. It appears to me you mean to spring a regular mine to-night, you two. There's poor aunt Mary believes at this moment that you are going to marry Lord Westbrook."
- "Oh, no she doesn't. At any rate, Lord Westbrook knows better."
- "Is he in the secret, too? Well, I can't make it all out."
 - "Never mind, Regy, there won't be any

secret long. Indeed, there never was any secret really; for I told mother and father two years ago, when Tom asked for me, that I did not mean to have any one else—as plain as words could say it. They told him they wouldn't let me be engaged for two years, and they forbade me to correspond or do anything all that time; but they said he might come for me again then if he liked. We have just waited until the time was up. It is exactly two years today, Regy. Very likely they have forgotten all about it, but that's no reason why we should."

"Well," said Regy wistfully, "you've got more in you than I ever gave you credit for, Kitty, and I would give all the world to be in that lucky beggar's place."

I sped upstairs with my parcel hugged

in my arms, locked the door of our bedroom, bade Eleanor bring the candles, and sat down at a little table by our fireside to see what my lover had sent me. Eleanor wanted to slip away, but I would not let her; so she busied herself laying out our ball-dresses on the bed. I cut the string, stripped off two wrappings of brown paper, and discovered a little japanned box, with a key and a letter tied to the handle. tore open the letter first, and read it twice through. "My darling," it began, "I have sent you my dear mother's diamonds to wear to-night (if you wish) in honour of this day, which she did not live to see. I have had them reset while I have been waiting in London for you—all except the locket with her portrait in it. You see how I have made sure of you, in spite of reports. I am coming with Captain Goodeve to-night. Look out for me, and contrive that we may get away to some quiet corner for a few minutes, before we face the world together."

I folded up the letter, and unlocked the little box—standing so as to hide what I was doing from Eleanor, though I am sure she would not have watched me for worlds. I took off the layers of jewellers' cotton, and took out the diamonds, and laid them in order on the table before me, which was a gipsy table, covered with dark blue cloth, that set them off finely. Then I stood for a minute, winking and blinking in the wonderful light they made, thinking how far more beautiful they were than even I had supposed; and then I flung a handkerchief over them and dragged Eleanor from her knees on the other side of the room, where she was rummaging our trunks for gloves and fans and all the little articles required for our evening toilet.

Eleanor had heard about the diamonds, but had not realized that they could be so exceptionally numerous, and so surprisingly large and pure. When I had placed the candles suitably and drawn off the handkerchief, she stood and stared at them in such open-mouthed surprise that she might just as well never have been aware of their existence. Tom had certainly had them set most exquisitely. They were in silver, of course, but there was scarcely any silver It was just like a web of wire, to be seen. and seemed hardly enough to hold them together securely until the perfect workmanship was examined. All the numerous, little, old-fashioned articles that had been in Mrs. Smith's collection, the buckles, and nine and stars, and so on, had been broken

up; and the stones were now clustered together in one simple set — necklace, bracelets, and brooch, and a beautiful little slender coronet, made to fasten with ribbon or elastic under the hair. There were no earrings. I had once told him that I would as soon think of wearing a ring in my nose, and he had remembered it.

"Oh, Kitty, Kitty," Eleanor exclaimed in an awe-struck whisper, "would anybody but a man ever dream of sending such things all about London by just anybody! And whatever are you going to do with them?"

"I am going to wear them to-night," I replied, my heart swelling proudly at the idea of such adornment, about which there was a dramatic fitness to the occasion that took my fancy wonderfully.

"But not without letting aunt Mary

know? It would be too great a shock for her, Kitty."

"They will surprise her, no doubt," I said calmly, smiling to think what a striking dénouement they would help me to make of it; "but I can't help it now. I could not tell her about them without telling her all about everything."

"There is time for that yet," she suggested anxiously.

"No, Nelly, no; I have told you that I dare not break it to her myself without Tom to help me. I should make such a dreadful mess of it—spoil it all, perhaps. As soon as Tom comes it will be all right."

"But to wear such things as those—and at a great ball—without telling her beforehand!"

"Tom evidently wishes it, or he would not have sent them."

"But what will she say? Do you think that, by any chance, she knew that old Mrs. Smith had them? She was her intimate friend for years. I should feel much more comfortable if I thought that." concluded my conscientious cousin.

"No; she never knew anything about them, and I am very glad she didn't. Do you know, Nelly, one great reason why I want to astonish her with them to-night, all in that bright gaslight, is that she will, perhaps, think the more of Tom. They will give him a sort of advantage when he asks her again for me."

"Oh, Kitty, aunt Mary is not like that."

"She is not greedy for wealth for me, I know; but she is ambitious for me to make a great marriage. And, though she knew Tom was a gentleman, and pretty well off, yet—yet she could not have been quite satisfied, or she would not have separated us, and tried to make me forget him. Now, you know, Nelly "—holding the necklace behind a candle, and slowly shaking it—"a man with family diamonds like these must be somebody of consequence. Why, you have seen Lady Westbrook with all hers on at once—and she thinks them equal to most people's—can you say they are to be compared with these?"

"I am sure they are not," Eleanor replied, promptly.

"Very well, then, Tom will have the advantage of Lord Westbrook in one respect."

Here the dressing-bell clanged through the house, and we heard Regy come out of his room whistling one of my songs slowly to himself. "Kitty," he called at the door, "come here a minute."

I ran to the door and put my head out. He was standing there in his evening dress, smelling of essence of something. All the Goodeves were fond of perfumes.

- "Well, what did he send you?" he asked mischievously.
 - "That's my business," I replied.
- "Don't you be saucy, Miss Kitty, or I'll go straight to aunt Mary and tell of you."
- "No, you won't Regy, and I'll show you presently. Are you going to dine out to-night, that you are dressed so early?"
- "I am, madam, and solely to do the amiable to you and your young man. I ought to remain in the bosom of my family on such an occasion, you know."
- "I suppose you ought," I assented, looking up at him wistfully.

"Instead of which I have told my mother, who has all those twelve brides-mails to provide for, poor soul! that the colonel wants to see me on pressing business."

- "Oh. Regy, you didn't?"
- "Well. I tell her a fib, anyhow. And now, instead of enjoying myself with a lot of nice girls. I am off to a solitary tête-à-tête dinner with that con—"

I with frew my head suddenly, and banged the door in his face.

"Very well," he shouted through the key-hole. "I will stay at home." Whereat I opened the door again. "Perhaps, after all, it is my duty to stay at home," he said, with mock earnestness.

"No, it isn't—never mind if it is! Oh, dear Regy, do go," I pleaded. "And Regy"—whispering timidly, while I got

very red — "when will you be back again?"

"Pretty early—between ten and eleven; that is, if I come back. Perhaps your young man will prefer a game of billiards."

"And shall I know when you are here?" I went on, determined that I would not be teased.

"Oh, yes; I'll manage that you shall know," he replied, dropping his voice and taking my outstretched hand kindly. "How had we better do it? I'll bring him in good time and take him through, so that he sees my mother and gets that over. And then we'll dodge aunt Mary, which won't be difficult in such a crowd, and I'll pilot him to that nice little warm corner in the conservatory, behind the big orange trees. If you are not gracefully reclining on that seat that's been put there specially for

people who want to spoon in peace and quiet-why, that is your look out." And he ran downstairs, whistling—a quavering whistle, rather, for he was feeling more than he showed.

We dressed for dinner in our ball dresses. Mine was a sort of hoar-frost work of white tulle, with only a great white sash looped into it behind, and a knot of coloured flowers out of my bouquet at my breast. I added nothing but my emerald cross (all the other eleven bridesmaids wore their ruby lockets), until dinner was over, and the time came when most of us retired to our rooms for fresh gloves, and a last look into the glass, before going into the ballroom. Then I took off my erewhile famous jewel, and hung myself with the great. bright dewdrops that were now to supersede it in the list of my possession

Eleanor, with reverent hands, clasped the bracelets round my arms, and the necklace round my neck, and tied the coronet over the top of my head by an invisible ribbon under my knot of golden braids—which, of course, I wore in the exact fashion that Tom had approved of two years ago, only dropped a little lower, perhaps, in deference to the prevailing mode. And then we both stood before the glass, quite lost in admiration.

"You look," said Eleanor—who had joyfully exchanged her cream colour and red ribbons for the very soberest silver grey gauze that anybody not a quakeress could wear at a ball without being conspicuous— "you look, Kitty, just like a princess!"

"That is just exactly what I feel like," was my complacent rejoinder. "I shall be a 'star' to-night, at any rate, shan't I? for

I shall, 'twinkle, twinkle' wherever I go. You don't think, Nelly," I went on anxiously, "you don't think, now, that that uncompromising mother of mine will say it is 'vulgar' for an unmarried girl to appear at a ball in such magnificence?—outshining all the dowagers, you know?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," answered Eleanor, smiling.

"Well let her—I can't help it. Now, kiss me, Nelly, and run downstairs, and don't let people come poking after me if you can help it. I know of a private way into the conservatory, if I can only get to it unmolested."

"I doubt there'll be no private ways to-night, Kitty; but I'll go down and be scout for you to the best of my ability. God bless you, dearest, and give you all that you expect."

When she was gone I still stood looking at myself in the glass, until a clock struck the quarter after ten-looking, and thinking of poor dear Mrs. Smith, and of that day, long ago, when I had seen the diamonds for the first time. So long, long ago! And yet now it seemed like yesterday. Then I wrapped myself in a whiteopera-cloak—one that daddy had presented to me on his own account last year—an elaborate combination of feather trimming and silk embroidery, with a little hood toit to draw over my head. I carefully covered my jewels with this, snatched up gloves, fan, and handkerchief, and ran downstairs by a back way in shame-faced haste; and, to my surprise and relief, got to the conservatory, and to the corner behind the big orange trees, unnoticed by any one save Eleanor, who was the most trustworthy of scouts.

There I stood and waited. I could not sit down, as Regy had proposed, and affect a graceful surprise at my lover's appearance there. I had gone there clandestinely, on purpose to meet him; and, if I was not above doing that, I was not above owning to it. I laid my cloak and gloves on the seat, and then I stood, with my ear bent to listen for the sound of his footsteps, vainly trying to quiet the loud beating of my heart, which was more distracting than the hum and bustle in the adjoining ball-room, or even the sound of the band instruments tuning up. There were Chinese lanterns hanging from roof and foliage around me, throwing a subdued light on leaf and flower, and on the rich painting of the Minton tiles at my feet; there were lovely clusters of pot plants full of blossom, making an arbour for the luxurious little

couch; and sweet and subtle wandering about, and a sound of trickling somewhere. It designed was especially for lovers, as Regy had said; but what was it to me where I met my Tom, so long as we were alone at our meeting. If it had been in the middle of a paddock, or in a gum tree scrub with a hot north wind smothering us with dust, or a tempest of rain drenching us to the skin, it would have been all the same both to him and to me. Indeed, I should have liked it a great deal better, for, as the minutes went on, and the violins and bass instruments squealed and boomed with an strengthening determination to get into tune and begin, I trembled with terror lest I should be searched for and discovered by some of those importunate young men, who always made a point of pouncing on my

programme as a preliminary introduction to their proper night's work.

But I could not have been there ten minutes when I heard Regy's voice; and then-marching firmly over the ringing tiles, with that long, light stride that I knew so well—came Tom, with his gallant head in the air, and a white flower in his button-hole. He put out his arms when he saw me, and I ran into them, and laid my hands on his shoulders, and my head on his breast, with an inarticulate cry of love and welcome that could take no shape in speech. I presume Regy had gone back into the ball-room, but I neither thought nor cared about that-or about anything, but that Tom and I had come together at last, and were never to be separated any more. We said no word; we did not move from where we stood; for several long minutes, that

comprehended the average bliss of years, he held me, a most willing captive, fast and close, while our lips clung together in the sweetest solemn kiss that ever true and faithful lovers gave to one another, as if they could not part again. There was no need for him to inquire of me how I had kept my promise, or for me to ask him how he had kept his. It was as if we had said good-bye on the gravel walk at Booloo-mooloo but yesterday.

"Well," he said, lifting his head at last, and looking with wet eyes at my diamond coronet, while he smoothed my hair from my forehead, "well, my little Kitty, the game is worth the candle, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, oh yes! a whole shipload of candles!" I replied, with a laugh and a sob, as I slowly gathered myself together.

"Yes; but I'm glad it wasn't more than vol. 11. 34

two years. They've been such long, long years, Kitty!"

"Don't speak of them!" I interrupted hastily. "They are over now. They can never come again."

"Not if I know it," said Tom.

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

As my little love story never had any plot, so its dénouement had none of the dramatic accompaniments that a dénouement should have—not even those small effects that I had, as I thought, provided for. Of course aunt Alice, as soon as she had an opportunity, told mother of the new guest whom her son had just introduced to her; and of course mother hunted up daddy, and told him; and it followed naturally that they hunted us up, in our corner behind the orange-trees, where we

were sitting, hand in hand, oblivious of them as yet, as of the two or three hundred more men and women and the braying band within a few yards of us. And then everything was explained—even the history of the diamonds (which did not dazzle mother so much as to prevent her from hinting that they were not quite the correct thing for the occasion), all in the tamest and most unromantic manner. No, it was not tame, either. Daddy was very much overcome, and so was Tom, before the explanation was ended; and daddy's way of taking it was just what I had always prognosticated in all my little schemes. Before mother could say a word, he had made our union as fast as uncle Armytage had made that between Bella and Mr. Goldstein in the morning, by telling Tom, with tears in his kind old

eyes, that if he didn't deserve to have me "after that," he'd like to know who didhang him if he wouldn't. After which he went so far as to declare that he'd sooner have Tom for his son than anybody, and that we had better consider it settled, and "say no more about it." Having thus exercised his paternal and marital privileges with more independence than was his wont (for he had at once made up his mind that his little Kitty should not be thwarted a second time), he inquired after his old friend, Mr. Smith; and learning that he had accompanied his son, and was now at the Charing Cross Hotelfor he was the J. F. Smith of the passenger list, the J. having been given in mistake for T.—he insisted in setting off there and then to visit him. And we saw no more of him that night. We heard afterwards

how much he had enjoyed those hours of his absence from our gay and festive He and his old neighbour sat in two armchairs by a cozy fire, with their pipes and glasses of steaming punch, and (when the first sadness of changed times had been put aside) talked of their children and their stations, and their crops and their wool, and the affairs of the colony in general, and of the Western District in particular, as in the dear old Narraporwidgee days. And from what I could make out, they appeared to have discussed the Land Tax and the Berry Ministry with rather a deeper interest than they bestowed on the affairs of Tom and me.

And mother—dear, ill-used mother! she had had her ambitions for me, but she had not been aware of the precise kind of foundation on which she had built them,

until now. And now—now that she comprehended the real state of the case—she no more dreamed of saying or doing anything to part us than daddy himself. She, too, was upset by the suddenness of the shock we had given her, but she did not show it much, and she recovered herself quickly; and then set herself to "face the world" with us (the world of aunt Alice's ballroom)—to chaperone her daughter "on her engagement"—with that ready and gracious dignity that never deserted her in the most trying moments. She would have no one suppose that she had been kept in ignorance of the designs of that big and handsome young man who had appeared on the scene so mysteriously, with his gifts of diamonds for his lady-love that were fit for a princess—the young man who, before the ball was over, had

quite superseded Mr. Ebenezer Goldstein as the hero of the day. Indeed, you would have thought she had been the promoter and patroness of the whole affair, if you had seen her sailing down the long room, leaning confidingly on his arm, as I saw her while I was having my last waltz with Lord Westbrook.

Poor Lord Westbrook! I found an early opportunity to tell Tom about him, and Tom was very generous and pitiful, and never dreamed of jealousy. I introduced them after a while, at Lord Westbrook's request, and I stood by while they made one another's acquaintance, and I felt proud of them both. Lord Westbrook asked Tom what sort of voyage he had had, and what college he had belonged to in Oxford, and what he had seen in town since his arrival; and Tom asked

him what sort of grouse season it had been, and whether he preserved much at his place. But there was a sort of shadowy tenderness and seriousness underlying this British sang froid that was very significant of the noble nature and the gentle breeding of them both; the one so anxious not to triumph, and the other not to let anybody but himself suffer for his defeat. I suffered for it, though, and I should have been utterly heartless if I had not.

When the time came for that "one waltz," which was to be a sort of farewell, we danced three or four rounds together without speaking—the blue dazzle of all my great diamonds attracting the most public observation to my presence in every part of the room; and then he took me to a quiet corner in the shadow of the

staircase, and I drew my white dress aside that he might sit down beside me.

- "Kitty," he said, after a short silence, "I wish you could see yourself—to see how lovely and how happy you look tonight."
- "I know I look happy," I replied. "Forgive me—I am ashamed—but I cannot help it. Oh, Lord Westbrook, I hope you will tell me before you go away to-night that you forgive me for anything I have done to keep you from being happy. It has been my misfortune. I would not have given you a moment's pain—you know I would not."
 - "Yes, dear, I know it very well."
- "I knew—I always told you I knew—that it would all turn out to-day as it has done."
 - "Yes; you did. But nothing could

have prevented me from loving you. And I am not sorry, Kitty. Though you can never belong to me, you will be a memory that I shall be the better for—yes, and the happier—as long as I live. There—we won't say any more about it. The first and greatest wish I have in the world is, that you should have what you wish. Now, don't look sad for Tom to see. Let him have all the brightness that he has been waiting for so long. Are you rested? Can you give me one more turn?"

So we went back to the ballroom, and had one more turn; and then, as we approached a place where mother and Tom were standing, she leaning on Tom's arm, and Tom waiting for me to come back to him, and we began to slacken our pace a little, he whispered, with one quick momentary pressure of his arm, "Good-bye

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and so it all more right for Tom and the and the re-very west grey-headed and bears it was married new, and I was not diagram my weeking hap, which was no id the sweetest haps in the early truncations six munits after our public

betrothal. We were married in Brookleigh church by uncle Armytage, "assisted" only by Bertie; and all the babies of the crèche were brought by their mothers to see the ceremony, and had enough wedding cake in their nursery next day to make them ill; only, fortunately, they exceptionally strong digestions. The wedding was in the highest degree unconventional and unfashionable, owing to the fact that Tom and I were allowed to carry out some of our own primitive ideas. It was very early, to begin with—in the first freshness of the morning, while the dew still clung to the flowers that Tom himself had gathered in the rectory garden and sent me by little Sissy's hands; and I refused to spoil my complexion with the ghastliness of dead-white silk just because everybody else did. I wore the most

charming morning dress of delicatelygoffered white muslin, all edged with Valenciennes lace-made à la Paris Exhibition, to clear the ground as I walked and a delicious little mob cap (for was I not going to be a married woman directly?) to match it; and if I didn't look pretty, as I told daddy, it was certainly not my fault. I pinned Tom's dewy little bouquet into the lace rufflings about my throat; I took a white shawl and a sunshade from the hall table; and then daddy and I set forth to the church through the green lanes leisurely, hand in hand, without even so much as the rectory brougham to attend The lovely morning sunshine was streaming in all the coloured windows of the little old church as we entered it, and found it full of the village people. Eleanor and her little sisters, mother, Mr. Smith,

aunt Kate, and Miss Müller were sitting in the chancel, and Tom stood in his place, with Regy beside him. Regy, at his own invitation, was best man, but a fortunate engagement to join Mrs. Goldstein on the continent had relieved us from the necessity of having Bertha or aunt Alice with Lord Westbrook was not there. He had sent me the most beautiful service of Sèvres china, and an invitation to Tom to make use of his Highland shooting box, in a cheerful letter that made me cry; but he did not come back to Brookleigh him-Indeed, I have not seen him at all self. since we parted in aunt Alice's ballroom.

The wedding itself was—well, a very good thing over. My knees knocked together as I stood, and my throat was so dry that I could hardly say "I will" distinctly, after all my boasting; and I

should have been glad of the most transparent bridal veil to soften the burning brilliance of my cheeks. It was soon over, however, and then we all went to the rectory, and I said good-bye to my dear ones there-kissing them all round with hearty fervour, not even excepting Regy. And then we condescended to make use of the carriage to get back through the wide-awake and excited village, where the people were all standing about to intercept our progress, clad in their Sunday bestour parents walking home afterwards, and receiving our congratulations for us. a few minutes we sat by ourselves waiting for them at the open window of the little breakfast-room, Tom and I—too deeply conscious of the change that had come to us to speak one word about it-with the sweet fresh air rustling through the ivyleaves over our happy young heads, resting one against the other in the uttermost ecstasy of perfect blessedness that human creatures can know in this world. And then we sat down, just the five of us, quietly to our wedding breakfast, which really was breakfast (for it was hardly ten o'clock), and not an untimely ball supper. After which we made preparations for our travels, with all the beautiful day before us.

And I carried out my views strictly with respect to my travelling costume. A pair of boots which had been worn for a month, and which would not make my feet ache and weary to be rid of them, in the first place; and for my head a shady Mother Hubbard that would obviate all necessity for the burden of parasols and almost of umbrellas also. My dress was a dark waterproof serge, very fine in

texture, and prettily made, of course; but one that I had worn during the previous spring just enough to take the gloss off without making it shabby; and I need not add that the skirt of it was cut to clear the ground. I did not put on the ulster, though that useful garment saw service afterwards on the breezy moors and lochs. But later in the day, when a foggy autumn twilight was making the air raw and chilly, I donned what was really and par excellence my wedding garment—a close-fitting jacket that nearly covered me, trimmed at all its edges with the skins of Australian water rats—a wide, glossy brown border of fur, more precious in my eyes than the blackest imperial sable. The sleeves and the collar of it were mementoes of our early days of courtship; the skirt, the front, and the

pockets were a sort of register of the two lonely years that followed, when Tom and Spring (poor Spring! who had died by a poisoned bait) set their traps and skinned their game, without ever meeting anybody by the moonlit river-side. Tom fingered the soft coat as we travelled along, and gave me the history of the several animals which had furnished its adornment, whose peculiarities he seemed to recognize by some tint or quality of hair that was invisible to me. It was like telling his beads, I told him.

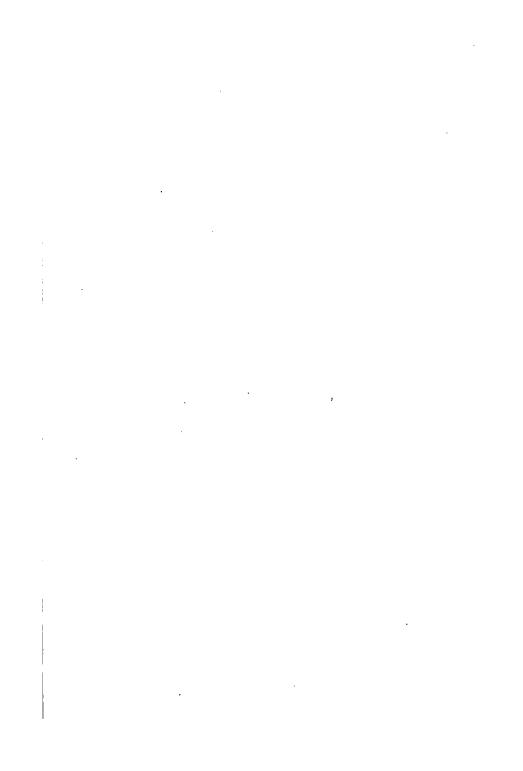
Oh, that happy, happy autumn! We went to Scotland for our honeymoon (with gun-cases amongst our luggage—for I did not mean that we should be like *Punch's* Edwin and Angelina, yawning for some friend, "or even some enemy" to turn up) and those rainy hills and windy uplands

were simply an earthly Paradise. trudged about together, hand in hand, from morning till night, in the rugged Highland solitudes—sometimes with dogs and gillies, but very seldom: and when we were tired of tramping in one locality, we took a boat or a train and set off to find another; never feeling tired—though almost always hungry-and never wishing for anything that the world could give beyond what we were so abundantly blessed with. Even my solicitude for my dear father and mother was set at rest, by the decision of our elders that we should all remain in England. Mrs. Smith's dying command to her husband was that he should "go home with Tom and stay Had it not been for that, the old man would have remained by her lonely grave at Booloomooloo until he shared it

with her; in which case there must have been some painful separations amongst some of us. As it was, we had nothing to regret, and nothing to desire—nothing.

THE END.

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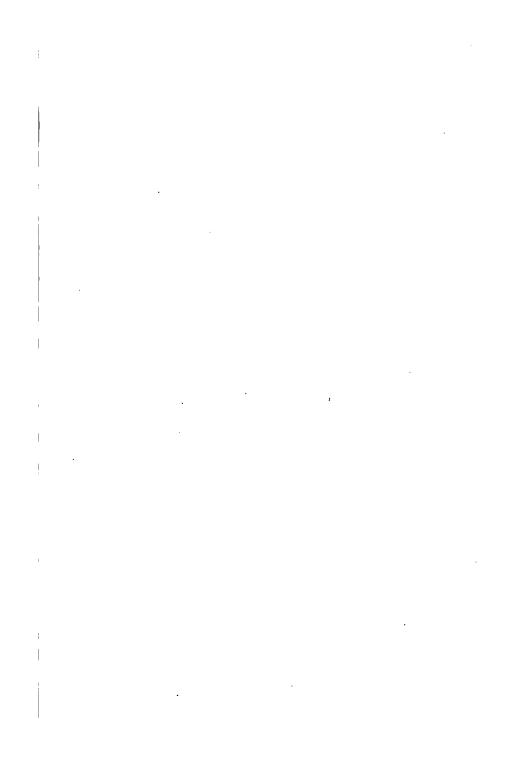


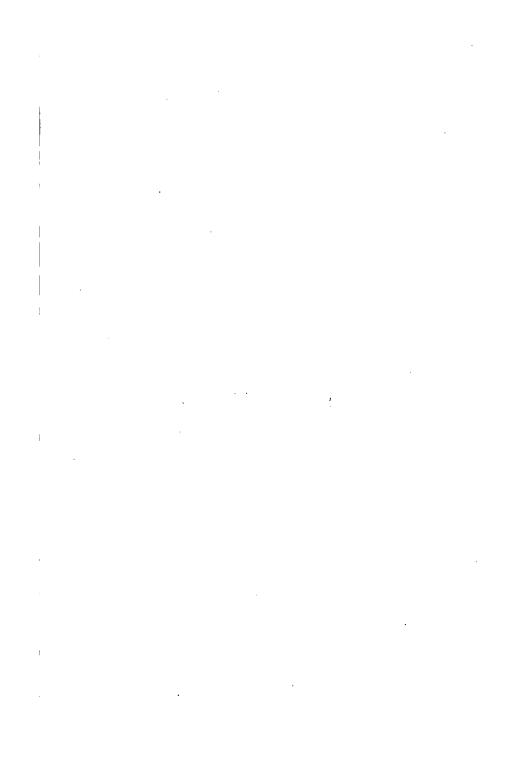
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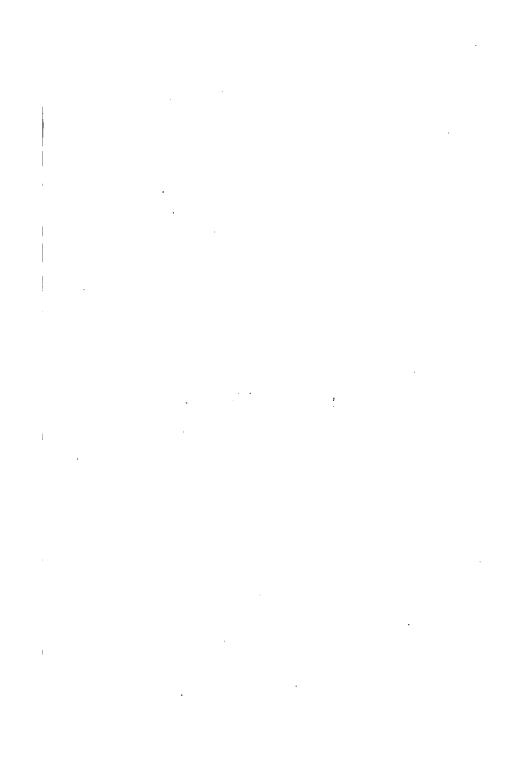
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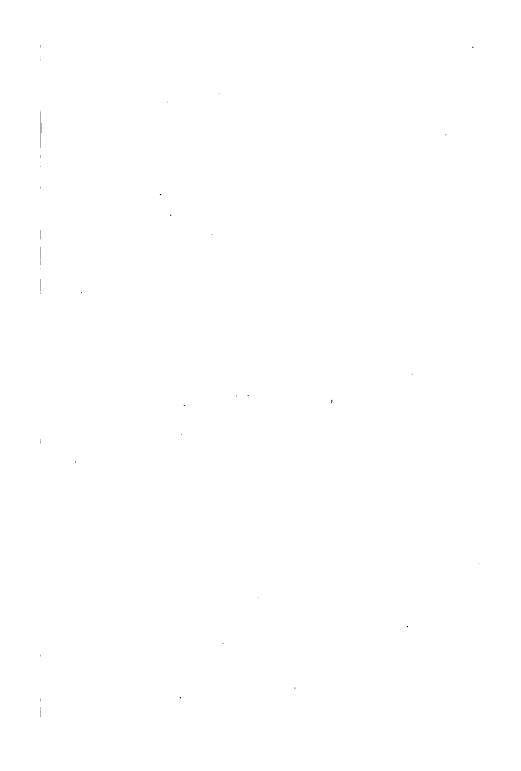
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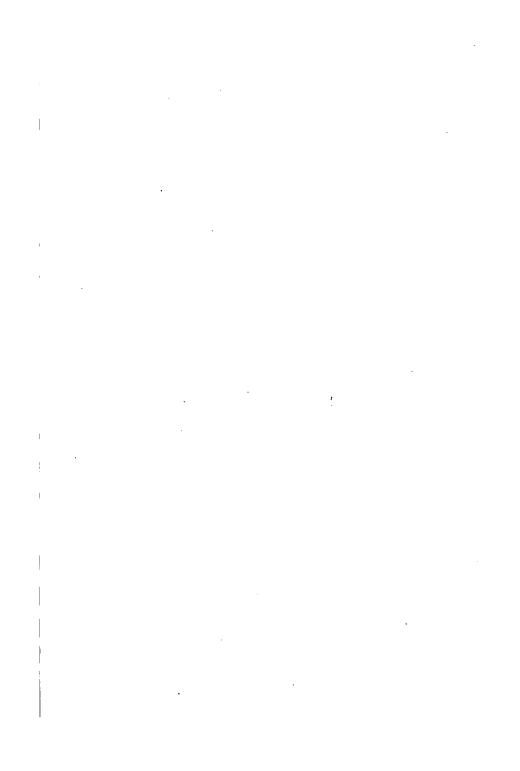




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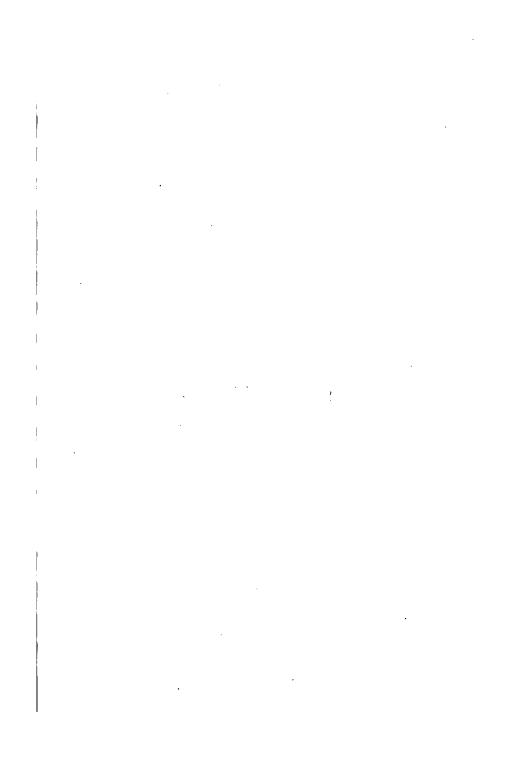
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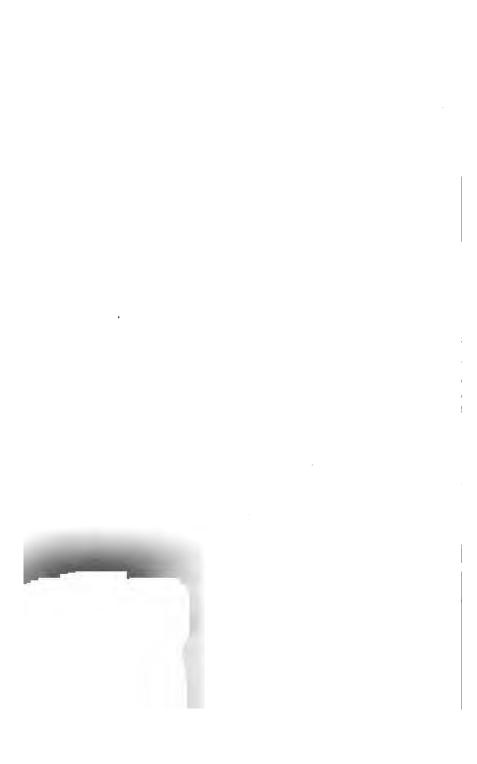
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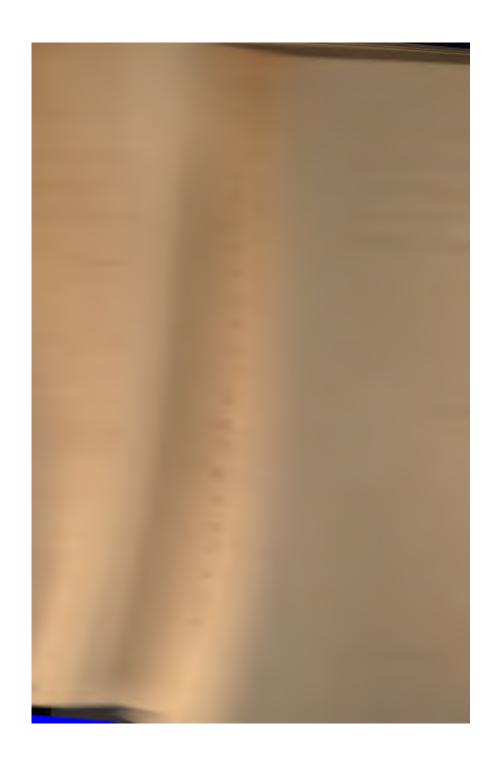




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